

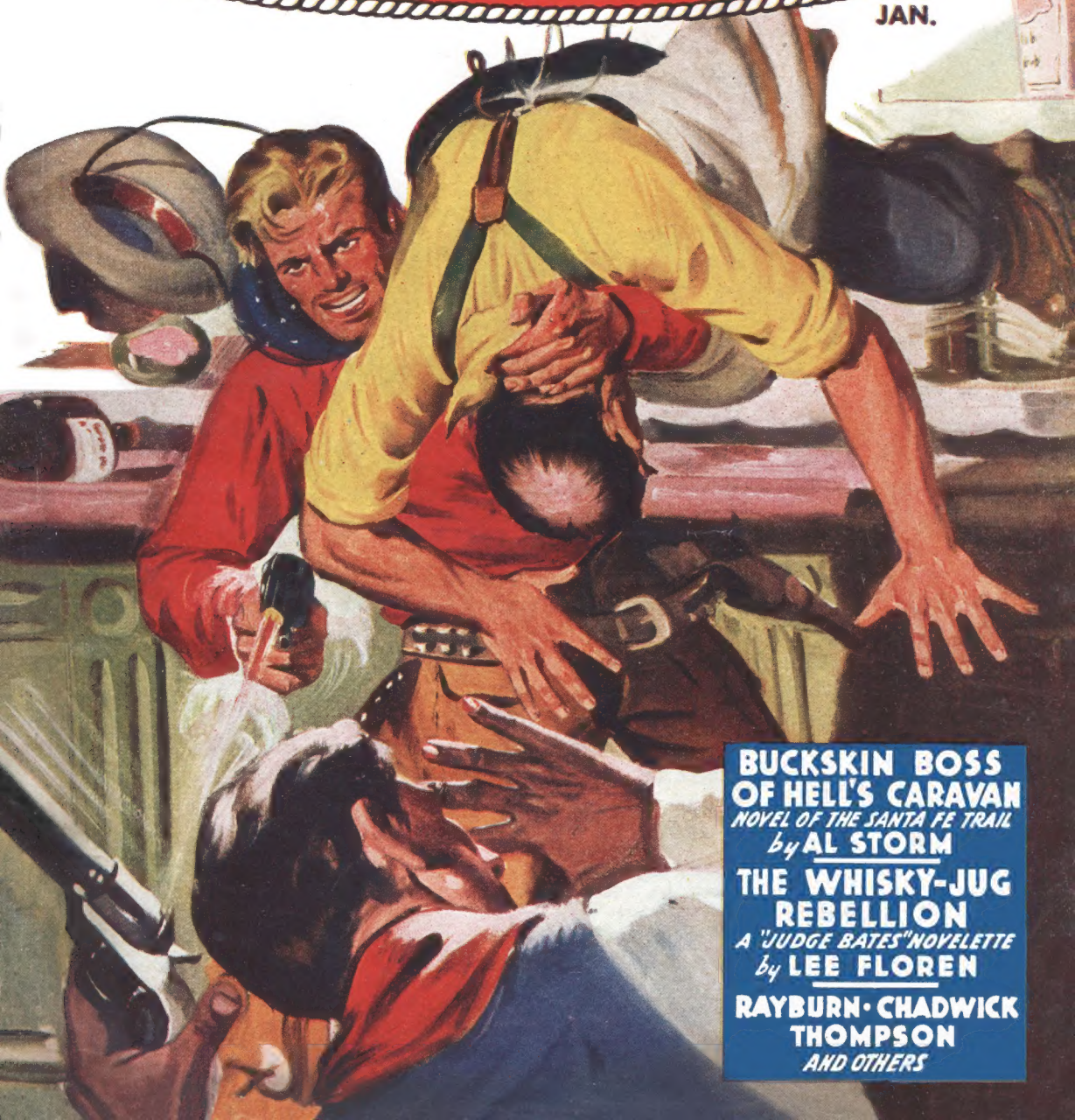
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44 Western

MAGAZINE

JAN.



**BUCKSKIN BOSS
OF HELL'S CARAVAN**
NOVEL OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL
by **AL STORM**

**THE WHISKY-JUG
REBELLION**
A "JUDGE BATES" NOVELETTE
by **LEE FLOREN**

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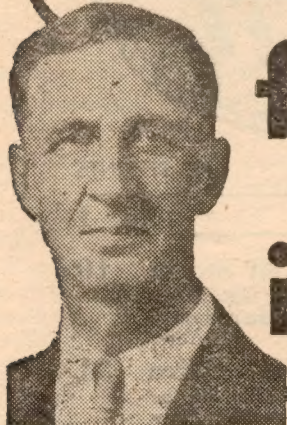
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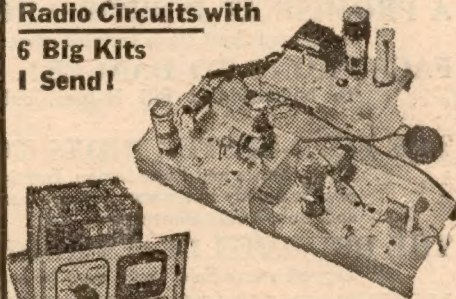


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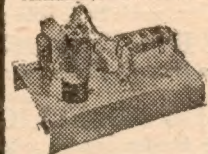


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Vol. 12

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★ .44 TALK ★

THE whole earth seemed to shake with the roar of pounding hoofs. The sound of the scattering, boogered herd was rivaled only by the tremendous crashes of thunder, followed by vivid lightning flashes, that ripped the night apart. With only six men in the trail crew, including the boss, Gil Cooper, it was impossible to hold the critters. When the storm finally subsided at big daylight, the herd was scattered over three counties.

"Well, that does it," announced Cooper, walking over to where the punchers huddled around a campfire. "Yuh couldn't of scattered that herd any better if yuh'd been sired by a whirlwind. What did I ever do to deserve a crew like you!"

One of the punchers, Bill Weston, stiffened and started to rise. Chunky little Pete Cheevers pulled him back. "Hold it, Bill," he muttered. "Cooper, it's Saturday. How about payin' us off?"

"If I had my way," roared Cooper, "I'd pay yuh in gun-lead, only yuh ain't worth it! You'll git yore pay when we round up this herd and sell it at Twin Forks, an' not before!" He turned on his heel and walked off toward the chuck wagon.

Weston stood up slowly and turned the air blue for five solid minutes, with the others chiming in whenever he paused for breath. "Of all the low-down coyote outfits!" he finished up. "Gil Cooper is too dumb to see a hole in a fence an' too cheap to mend it. He's—"

Absorbed in Weston's tirade, none of the men had noticed a group of four riders, with the Circle J brand on their horses' flanks, ride up and dismount beyond the fire. Now they came striding over, and the leader said easily, "That's right, Bill. Everybody knows Gil Cooper's tighter'n a calf in a bog-hole. Some day somebody's goin' to shoot that son for bait!"

The Circle J rider had laughed loud and long. "We never been able to figger out why you fellers would keep on workin' for such a hay-wire outfit. A man-breaker boss, the grub's wormy—"

"Why, you ornery sheepherder's son!"

Weston yelled. He took a long step forward and swung at the Circle J man's pointed jaw. The man went down, but he was up again in a minute, fists flailing. The rest of the punchers joined in, tired as they were, and in a minute the camp-ground was a melee of slugging, wrestling, kicking and clawing men. It ended only when the Circle J riders, all the fight knocked out of them, staggered to their horses and rode away.

Bill sat down again with a sigh of satisfaction, the others grouping themselves around him. After a moment little Peewie White spoke up. Though he was a green hand with the outfit, he had held up his end of the fight as well as anybody; but now his face was troubled.

"Bill," he said, "it was a good fight, but what was she all about? Them fellers was only agreein' with what we said ourselves!"

"Why, Peewee," Bill explained carefully, "*you* can say the boss is mean. *You* can say we don't git paid regular. *You* can say the ranch ought to be given back to the Sioux. *You* can say it. But by God, nobody else had better try it. The Lazy L is *our* outfit! Never forget it, son!"

That frontier spirit of loyalty to one's outfit may seem a little remote from the fast-moving events of today. But if you think about it, you'll see it isn't.

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Our boys on all the fighting fronts work just as hard, fight as desperately, live as dangerously as any of our regimented and enslaved enemies. But there's one important difference; one that sometimes means everything. We have the right to gripe when we feel like it! We've called the skipper of our own vessel some mighty black names—but we beat up a stranger in a Casablanca bar for agreeing with us!

—The Editor

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By CHESTER CONANT

THE greatest pony-ride in history was made by Francis Xavier Aubry, a French-Canadian trader of Santa Fé. Aubry, a wiry little man, about five feet two and weighing a scant hundred pounds, beat Buffalo Bill Cody's record, 322 miles—the longest pony-express journey on record—when Cody and the other express riders were still children.

On December 22, 1847, Aubry started from Santa Fé, accompanied by five horsemen and a servant. A short distance out the little party was attacked by a band of robbers who stole ten mules. Undaunted, Aubry made up for lost time and passed Fort Manna that night, alone with his servant. The five horsemen had dropped out, unable to keep the pace.

Sixty miles out of Council Grove, Aubry's servant was forced to quit from sheer exhaustion. Aubry went on alone, and reached Independence on January fifth. He had ridden 800 miles in fourteen days!

Gathering a fine stock of goods in Independence, Aubry left for Santa Fé with loaded wagon trains, and reached the market ahead of all competing traders.

Selling his entire stock, Aubry returned to Independence from Santa Fé by horseback, averaging 150 miles a day. He killed three horses and two mules, walked forty miles, went three days without provisions, and slept only four and a half hours en-route. But he made the trip in eight days

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and ten hours, beating his previous record by almost six hours!

Business compelled Aubry, shortly afterward, to take another trip. Believing he could beat his second record, he wagered \$5,000 that he could ride to Independence in six days—eight days less than his first record!

Aubry sprang to saddle, and galloped out of Santa Fé toward Las Vegas, seventy-four miles away, where fresh horses awaited.

When he reached the next relay point, Aubry found that Indians had killed his man and taken the horses. He was forced to ride on to the Cimarron, 150 miles ahead, where three fresh horses were waiting. He mounted one and drove the others ahead of him.

As he was nearing the Arkansas River, the last of the three horses gave out. Aubry walked twenty miles to the crossing of the Arkansas—to the next fresh horse.

On the evening of September seventeenth, a dusty, travel-worn ghost, rode into Independence, Missouri. So exhausted that he had to be lifted from the saddle, Aubry could only talk in whispers. His saddle was caked with blood.

Aubry had killed six horses, walked twenty miles and slept a total of two and a half hours, to establish a record of five days and sixteen hours for the trip—a record which has never been surpassed.

Aubry's life came to an end in 1854 as the result of a shooting affray with his former friend, Major R. H. Weightman, editor of the Santa Fe *Herald* in a hotel bar-room.

The routes the French-Canadian emigré had discovered figured greatly in the expansion of the young country. Some of Aubry's routes are still well-traveled, now perpetuated in ribbons of smooth concrete and trails of shining steel.



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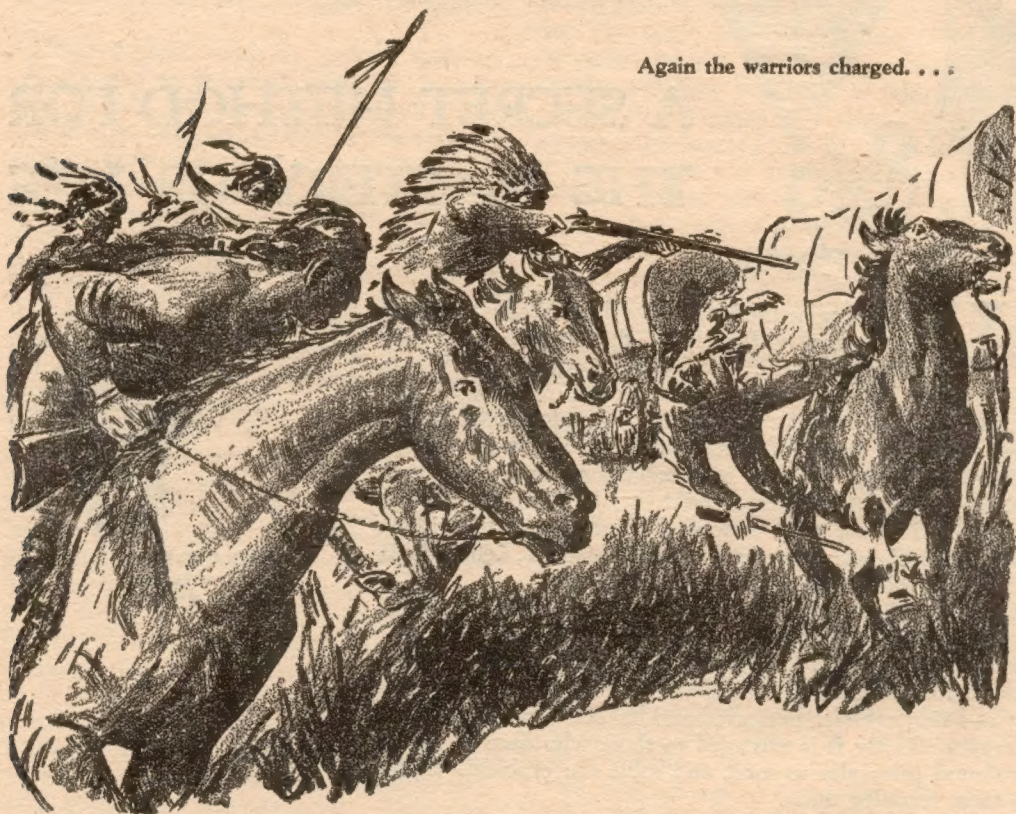
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CALIFORNIA

BUCKSKIN BOSS OF HELL'S CARAVAN

By Al Storm

Again the warriors charged. . .



Boss of a dissension-torn caravan, Skid Lambert swore he'd get his people through to Santa Fe. . . . But the crew of loot-hungry wagon-train traitors figured that if the killing drouth didn't play into their own hands, their night-hidden guns would!

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble on the Trail

WAGON train boss Skid Lambert collared Red Purcell just beyond the hulking cliff, Pawnee Rock. Lambert's roan gelding cut across in front of Purcell's bay, and the two sat eye to eye, tall and lean, while tension piled explosively between them and spread down along the approaching wagon train. And

not one of the eighty-odd men handling the sixty-four Pittsburg and Conestoga freight wagons doubted that the blow-off had come!

"Since you threw your Four Vargas wagons in with us at 110-Mile Creek crossing," Skid Lambert charged tersely, "you've been trying to split up and get control of this wagon train. I'm making my war-talk now. I'm Train Boss and I stay Train Boss until we reach Santa Fe—or until a train council decides otherwise!"

Lambert jerked his head toward the slow-



Hard-Hitting Wagon-Train Novel

moving string of wagons without turning his attention away from the glowing green orbs of the other. Beneath his sandy mustache, Red Purcell's thin mouth twisted in rage. His hand drifted nearer the heavy-calibered belt-gun snugged in its beaded holster.

This was the blow-off that had been building up pressure all the long, dusty trek from 110-Mile Creek. Both men knew it, and both let a deceptive laxity settle them firmly and vigilantly in their saddles.

"It takes a man to ramrod a wagon train through Comanche country," Red Purcell bawled loudly, canting his head so that his voice would carry to the approaching wagons. "More of man than a hatchet-faced wet-ear can fill. I hear tell you played it

high and mighty around Fort Leavenworth. And you snooped into my wagons at 110-Mile. But below the Kaw you're on your own."

The half-veiled challenge did not escape the weather-browned young train boss. He moved his fingers beltward, a mirthless smile pulling at his mouth.

Red Purcell's shoulders sagged under the blue velvet covering of his fancy Mex vest.

Like a stubby dark worm crawling the buffalo grass wastes of the lower Kansas country, the double line of bale-piled, canvas covered wagons inched toward the knoll where Purcell and the train boss glared at each other. No man laughed or spoke. With bated breath they watched the grim contest unfolding there on the

knoll, stark and brutal against the hot sky.

"And your segundo, Curly Reed's still trying to get Julie Thorpe to order her father's wagons back to the Fort," Skid Lambert added icily.

Surprise widened Purcell's eyes for a second. Then his sneer reappeared. "Maybe he's feathering his own nest," Purcell sneered.

Skid Lambert boiled over. "Well, he ain't! The Thorpe wagons aren't leaving this train! And neither's Julie Thorpe! I'll see to that!"

A muffled exclamation cut into the train boss' shouting. Lambert stiffened. The Thorpe wagons were leading the caravan, and they were right behind him. Without turning, Skid Lambert knew that Julie Thorpe had overheard him.

"—afeered she'll get out of reach, Lambert?" Purcell taunted. "She's a prize catch out where we're going all right."

SEETHING with mortification, Skid Lambert launched himself half out of the saddle. His knotted fist, backed by two hundred pounds of rage and muscle, ripped into Red Purcell's leering face. The redhead flung half-stunned to the ground. For a long moment he lay still, then Purcell started cursing and lurched to his hands and knees, his hand jerking beltward.

At the same time, Lambert caught a sound from the wagon train behind him. He whirled. Curly Reed was leaping for the saddle of his spotted pony which trotted alongside the Thorpe lead wagon. And even as he gained his mount, Reed dug for his pistols in a blur of motion, his face a mask of fury.

Pinched between Red Purcell and young Reed, Skid Lambert shot his own hand to his gun.

But Reed did not fire. He held both guns level, hammers back. Caution slowly blanked out the killer-light in his eyes and he started beyond the hard-jawed train boss. But Lambert wasn't to be taken in by such a hoary frontier trick. He held his pistol for a finish shoot-out.

"They's a four ounce ball o' Hawkins' greetings in this old barrel just hopin' you don't holster them pop-pistols," a dry voice cut in softly. "Just empty your hands, Reed, and you'll live to ride away. Pronto!"

A lean, oldtimer in buckskin and a battered hat rode across the corner of Lambert's vision. Purcell stopped fumbling for the pistol that had jolted from his holster. Reed froze rock-still, his jaws knotted with rage. Then Hank Bradshaw's old Hawkins rifle moved slightly and Reed suddenly dropped his pistols. That big bore rifle could tear the living guts out of a man's belly, and every man in the wagon train knew it.

"This ain't settled and off the books, Lambert," Purcell mouthed savagely. The redhead jerked at the reins of his big bay and swung up. "We'll have a settling afore long—get that!" he promised.

Hank Bradshaw never moved; his Hawkins rifle centered on Reed's face as Red Purcell galloped off. "Ride along, purp," the old Scout ordered. "This pure desert air is gettin' pee-luted with polecat taint."

The youngster's shoulders dipped, but the old Scout's rifle prodded him in the ribs and all his fight drained away. Snarling in helpless fury, Reed reined over and spurred away, heading towards the jolting Thorpe wagons where Julie was riding the high seat of the lead wagon.

The train boss stool slab-jawed and watched the handsome young Purcell gunman rein in at the Thorpe wagons and leap toward the seat. He'd start some more soft talk to get the nine Thorpe wagons to pull out. It was a completely senseless thing the kid was trying to do. Those nine wagons, loaded heavy with bolts of calico, cotton print, and velvet, were worth a small fortune in Santa Fe. Ninety percent of their value would be lost if they turned back to Fort Leavenworth. And yet Lambert knew that he was powerless to stop the desertion should Julie Thorpe listen to the soft-tongued Reed and decide to turn back.

SOUNDLESSLY the train boss cursed the ill fate that had brought Red Purcell and his crew begging for admittance into the wagon caravan. Purcell's crew of droop-shouldered renegades had aroused the train boss' distrust from the start. But Purcell's wagons had been in order, carrying barrels of flour and bales of dry goods to Manual Vargas in Santa Fe—the same consignee as the fourteen freight wagons his own hired drivers were tending.

"Keep your eye peeled for that youngster," old Hank Bradshaw muttered soft-

ly. "Else you'll be losing your hair some dark night. Get in the first lick," the scout counseled gravely. "And them varmints won't be around to ease steel into your hind-side, first time you look t'other way."

It was ruthless advice born of Bradshaw's long experience in the rawhide land of kill-or-be-killed. Hank Bradshaw and his old partner, Sioux Klemming, could look down a back trail of thirty years making, wandering from the stone canyons of the Snake to the mud flats of the Rio Brazos, through mountain and desert, ample proof that the advice was good.

Instinctively, Lambert tasted the relief that elimination of Purcell's hard-case outfit would give him. The redhead's insulting jibes, the endless jeering and counter-suggestions, were slowly undermining the caravan's confidence in their young train boss' leadership. And the deeper the wagon train penetrated into the dangerous Comanche country, the more overbearing had Purcell become. The caravan grew tense with doubt and suspicion.

But Lambert knew that he couldn't get rid of Purcell by unexpectedly shooting first. He could, however, settle with the arrogant redhead in the open—now once and for all. One man ride on; the other remain forever in the heat-smeary grasslands. Lambert checked the loads of his pistol carefully, then wheeled his gelding.

CHAPTER TWO

Comanche Raiding Party

DDOUBLE-LINED and flanked by mounted guards, the entire sixty-four huge Pittsburg, Vargas, and Conestoga prairie freighters rolled along toward the brassy haze that blurred earth and sky into one shimmering mist of heat. Far to the left the Arkansas river twisted and ahead lay Ash hollow, the last wood to be found east of the mountains. Dwarfed by the immensity of the great American desert surrounding them, the horsemen guards kept pace with the toiling wagons or loped ahead and to the sides, constantly scanning the blank horizons for sign of Comanche or Pawnee.

Lambert knew that the near guards were watching as he wheeled his mount. Then a distant roar came surging from the front of

the caravan. Only leather-lunged Sioux Klemming shrieked like that when he wanted attention. Lambert jerked the gelding about and lined out for the head of the wagon train.

"Follow up, Hank!" Lambert bellowed as the gelding tore past the watchful oldtimer. Bradshaw kicked his mule into motion and raced along the rumbling line of wagons.

"That old coon's run him down an excitement," Bradshaw spat shrilly as he came up beside the train boss. "Yips like a Californy painter when he scents him a shootin' fracas."

Bradshaw's words caused the train boss to think of Julie Thorpe falling into hands of the Comanches. Perhaps Reed was right; she ought not to risk. . . . Then they flashed past the Thorpe wagons where Reed was sitting alertly watchful beside the woman. Without a sideways glance, Lambert slanted out to intercept Sioux Klemming who was loping in from the right fore.

Klemming was a squat, hairy, wind-whipped counterpart of his buckskin-clad partner, the same canny old eyes and frontier-scarred carcass. He sawed reins with a volley of Sioux profanity and swung sideways to rest his haunches pointing toward the rolling haze of burnt buffalo grass.

"Fresh Comanche sign," he grunted. "Scouting if party moving fast toward the west as if they had us spotted."

Silently the three frontiersmen stared ahead—somewhere along that vast trail lurked a wake party of Comanches. If they were just a small raiding party, then the wagon train would be strong enough; but if they were scouting for a large force—

Anxious plainsmen rode up and formed a ring around the train boss and the two old scouts. The Thorpe wagons came abreast the knot of men and stopped, forcing the caravan to halt until further counsel was decided upon. Lambert found himself staring at the golden haired girl on the high seat, while his mind turned bitter with recollections of the grisely fate of other women attempting the Trail—and failing! The men grimly waited to learn what fared, each sensing the dangers that lurked ahead.

"Many?" Lambert asked Sioux.

The old Scout spat into the crisp brown grass. "Passel," he grunted. "Nary more'n a passel."

LAMBERT grunted. Sioux Klemming's "passel" was any number the old Indian fighter thought made good odds in a fracas, ten or half a hundred. The squat oldtimer poked raw black tobacco into a pipe-stone bowl and watched his news soak into the crowd. Old Hank Bradshaw hefted his powder horn significantly. It was fight sign as sure as though a Comanche arrow had sunk into one of the Pittsburg wagons.

"Comanches probably watching us," Lambert said gruffly to the waiting men. "They may or may not attack. But we've got to act like they will and keep double watch constantly, or they'll take us off guard. We'll bed down early and start late."

"Skeered of a handful of redskins," Purcell jeered suddenly, shoving forward. "Just head right into them with guns blazing. They ain't got the guts for a head-on fight—like some other big headed jaspers I know."

Lambert whipped to his feet, facing the redhead, hell boiling in his hard blue eyes.

"Hobble that long tongue, Purcell!" Lambert chopped swiftly. "And don't ever get the idea a Comanche ain't got the stomach for a fight. They'll be pawin' for scalp afore we reach Bent's Fort. Bet your last peso on that!"

Purcell cackled mirthlessly, and Lambert saw the indecision taking root in the crowd eager to reach Santa Fe. If bluffing the Comanches would get them through quicker, many were all for it. But Lambert knew how fatal such ignorance or carelessness would prove. He stepped toward the sneering redhead who wrapped a freckled hand around the haft of a long knife.

"Finish that play, Purcell!" Skid challenged. "Jerk that steel or pull your belt gun. But I'm the man who's leading this wagon train into Santa Fe!"

The redhead glided forward, grinning his delight. Just out of arm reach he crouched, waiting for the train boss.

"Get back to your wagons and keep your head down," Skid Lambert ordered. "Or I'll kill you here and send your wagons out to make their own crossing!"

Red Purcell glared at the Train Boss and Skid Lambert could see the kill-light burning in the man's eyes. But Purcell didn't want his wagons thrown out of the caravan. It was that alone that kept the redhead

from pressing the fight, and Lambert was quick to seize his advantage.

"Show that big-head," Curly Reed yelled from the high seat of the Thorpe wagon. "Who's kingpin of this outfit!"

Curly Reed's talk went too far. The train boss held absolute and unquestioned authority while on drive. Every man of the caravan knew the ruling and knew that he had no right to go against Lambert purely on Red Purcell's say-so. They swung back into line backing the train boss' decision.

OLD KLEMMING started his Sioux swearing again and Bradshaw fondled his long bladed butcher knife. Both scouts eyed the two Purcell men, and the redhead saw instantly how the tide had swung back against him.

"You know I'm not afraid of you, don't you, Lambert?"

"I know," the train boss nodded.

Purcell smiled twistedly and rode back along the stilled wagon train, while Curly Reed climbed from the Thorpe wagon to his own spotted pony and followed.

The redhead was backing up for some reason, but fear was not it. Then an ominous sense of peril seeped slowly through the trail men, and they forgot Red Purcell in face of more pressing dangers.

"What's the deal, Skid?" a bearded husky from the St. Vrain wagons asked. "What you planning to do?"

"Gettin' to Santa Fe," Lambert stated determinedly. "Ain't no passel of Comanches going to burn this train. Just you keep your long-guns loaded and handy. And don't stray from the train. Ain't a hollow or badger hole atween here and the Picketwire river as won't be holding Indians."

Lambert's narrowed gaze probed down the two lines of loaded wagons and blowing ox teams. Seeing Red Purcell's string in last place, he added pointedly: "And don't let any loose talk addle your senses. You'll need all the savvy you can scrape up if we are to get through."

Sioux Klemming sputtered into a loud comment in guttural Sioux talk, and Hank Bradshaw nodded without answer. The two old partners rode off toward the roll of knolls where Sioux Klemming had cut Indian sign.

"On the alert, form a circle when you

hear a shot," the sober-faced young train boss warned. "Warn all your men and keep bunched as close as driving room will let you."

No second warnings were necessary. Veterans of the Trail knew the unholy ferocity of striking Comanches; the greenhorns making their first crossing were struck silent by the grimness coming to the fore in the seasoned veterans.

Without words they turned and rode back to their wagons scattering along the train and making certain that every man carried a rifle or shotgun. Skid Lambert turned toward the head of the train.

As he approached the Thorpe wagons he touched his flat-crowned hat-brim. "Howdy, Miss Julie," he said woodenly. "Reckon you know what to do if any savages cut loose."

Blue eyes smiled shy welcome to the dark-visaged train boss. She nodded, suddenly sober when he did not return her smile. Lambert was awkwardly aware of the curve of her body the shapely golden tan of her bare arms and a flush of color swept across his face.

"Acting like a damned wet-nose school kid," he cursed himself silently. "Maybe she is pretty, but she's a high-headed daughter of Colonel John Thorpe of Fort Leavenworth. And she's got Curly Reed underfoot all the time."

"Mr. Reed warns me that I ought to go back now," she said suddenly. "He says that our nine wagons make it safe for us to go back. Do you think I should?"

SKID LAMBERT felt surprise. Curly Reed had been urging Julie Thorpe to draw out from the train and head back to the Fort ever since Red Purcell had joined the train. But the train boss hadn't for a moment thought that Julie Thorpe would listen. She'd kicked over the traces and bawled Skid out proper right in front of the Colonel there in the Fort when he'd tried scaring her into staying back. A rapid sluff of hooves sounded, and the train boss saw Curly Reed riding up on the far side of the wagon.

"I reckon you've crew enough to make a fight of it," Skid Lambert told Julie Thorpe slowly. "I did all my scare-talking at Fort

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Leavenworth trying to make you stay back, but you couldn't be changed. I reckon it ain't the words but the man who talks them that counts with you."

His surly tones brought a faint flush of color to her cheeks, and her eyes wavered with sudden hurt. "I mean," she added quickly. "Is—is the danger that serious?"

"It's always bad along the Sante Fe trail," the Train Boss said. "Every rod of this road is soaked with the blood of men daring to travel it. But you and your father's wagons are safer in this train than you would be trying it alone—whichever way you decide to head."

Curly Reed reined in with a dark scowl. "Every minute she travels west brings death that much nearer to her," he snapped. "She's got to go back—now!"

The young gunman's urgency strained his voice, stiffening the train boss with surprise. Skid Lambert turned to him. "Maybe you know something that makes you so certain," he muttered. "Maybe it ain't just guessing."

But Reed set his jaw stubbornly and refused to be drawn out in further talk.

The troubled train boss drew up and let the wagon train roll on past him, marking the slow course of its travel with a long dust-feather that rose high in the baking air. And his mind wouldn't let him forget Curly Reed's impassioned words. "Every minute she travels west brings death that much nearer!"

CHAPTER THREE

Waiting For Death

SLOWLY the sun set, but no further sign of Indians relieved the tension. The caravan corralled early on the north bank of the Arkansas river, watered stock and withdrew behind the bulwark of heavy wagons and stacked gear.

"They've let us poke into their pockets," Bradshaw said, spitting into the low glow of coals of the council fire. "They's Comanches infesting this country like fleas on a prairie purp's hide. But they ain't actin' normal."

"How many?" Skid Lambert asked.

Bradshaw fingered his knife without speaking. His squat partner puffed on his red pipe.

"Massacre numbers," he grunted stoically, "if'n we was to lose a single wagon."

"We ain't aimin' to lose any wagons," a chorus of low determined voices made clear.

Heads swiveled toward the grouching redhead who had been trying for caravan leadership. The caravan was sticking with the train boss and the redhead was sticking along too, like it or lump it.

"That's right," Purcell put in solidly. "My wagons been eating this train's dust this far. I reckon I'm smart enough to stick it out with the rest of you."

Lambert raised hard blue eyes from the smouldering coals of the tiny fire and looked at the redhead. "Then tell Curly Reed to keep quiet! He's still working to get Julie Thorpe turned back to Fort Leavenworth."

"He'll stop that damn-fool talk," Purcell whispered hoarsely, "or I'll break his damned neck!"

The night wore on, rasping at nerves already drawn taut. Lambert hitched his belt around to a more comfortable position and made sure his knife hung loose and easy. He prowled incessantly around the grim, dark caravan, exhorting himself and the doubled guards to greater vigilance. Once he threw himself flat and lay with ear pressed to the ground for half an hour, but whatever had ruffled his nerves with warning did not repeat itself. An hour before dawn grew pale, Hank and Sioux sneaked off into the darkness.

Then the pre-dawn light etched the back-trail with color. But the Comanches did not attack, and Lambert stirred the tautly watching caravan into feverish activity. The big circle broke and slowly stretched out into a compact double line of slow-traveling wagons.

"Comanches ain't left yet," Lambert warned. "And they ain't afraid. They're just biding their time and waiting for us to get careless. When we do, they'll try to wipe us out."

"Skeered of a shadow," Reed jeered, sitting his spotted pony with an erect easy carriage. "Regular hero—savin' this wagon train from the big, bad savages."

Before the train boss could open his mouth, Purcell came spurring up beside the flashily dressed Reed. With one swing of his arm, he unseated Reed and dumped him in the fresh-churned dust.

"I'm playin' it along with this caravan!" Purcell snarled. "You get on a wagon and stay there until you learn to keep your mouth shut!"

Curly jerked to his feet, hand falling slowly toward his side, as wild rage distorted his handsome features. "I don't like that play, Red," he said ominously. "I don't like it."

"You'll get on a wagon and stay there," Purcell ordered harshly. "And you'll keep your mouth shut. I ain't wantin' trouble with this wagon train now."

Reed slowly let his hand stray away from his holstered sixgun. The redhead nodded and spurred away, leading Reed's spotted pony.

SKID LAMBERT watched closely as the fuming gunman stalked to a Purcell wagon and climbed up. It wasn't like the redhead to turn cautious like he had. Purcell's contempt of the Comanche danger wasn't all bluff, but for some reason the redhead was holding his own men in line. He wasn't taking any chance on being abandoned by the caravan.

The wagon train plodded on, red-eyed men straining ahead for some tangible form of the ever-present danger. The two old scouts rode in and made known that the Comanches were riding on all sides of the train, keeping it under constant surveillance. As if to prove the old plainsmen's words, little bands of warriors appeared for a moment on the yellow skyline.

"Don't like it," Sioux grumbled. "Tain't like a Comanche to waste his time thisaway. They's a lot of bloody thinkin' goin' on somewheres."

But the Comanches did not come closer. They hovered just beyond rifle-shot of the caravan, riding into the hollows only to reappear again. Lambert called an early stop, and the circle was formed in a flurry of flying dust. After the long tense silence of travel, a nervous bedlam of shouting and noise echoed about the wagons. Sixteen men took the stock down to the Arkansas river for water, and another thirty men kept watch with cocked rifles across their saddle pommels.

The sun sagged into the west, and the Comanches showed themselves again. With shrieking bravado they rode toward the wagon train, then wheeled and darted away

just beyond good rifle range. The Comanches shook their ancient flintlock rifles in defiance, but made no move to attack the watching caravan.

Aching with bone-deep weariness, Lambert rode around the outside of the corral, testing its strength with an experienced eye. Then, crowding between a McCullough and Fitzpatrick wagon, he circled the corral again on the inside. Even old Bradshaw and Sioux were growing tired.

A minor chieftain made a yowling dash toward the wagon train and then pulled in to yell his taunts. Watching him for a moment, a bearded St. Vrain driver suddenly dived into one of the wagons and emerged with a heavy, long-barreled rifle. He threw himself to the ground and poked the gun through the spokes of one huge wheel.

"I'll show that coppery devil," the driver muttered raggedly.

Lambert was on the man in a flash. He grabbed the wagoner's shoulder and wrested the rifle away.

"Keep watch and they may not attack," he panted into the ear of the straining St. Vrain man. "Kill one buck and we'll be in for it, for fair!"

"That's true sign," Bradshaw growled. "Them chest-pattin' bucks won't lay down to a challenge."

"But they'll lay down to a bellyful of lead," another voice took up. "And I'm all for givin' it to them!"

"You talk like a blamed ijit!" someone growled. "Lambert's right. You'd have us all in a pinch with that greenhorn rifle play."

LONG hours of nerve-fraying tension caused tempers to grow ragged, and friendly tongues to burn caustically. The train boss and the threatening Comanches were forgotten. The St. Vrain driver lunged to his feet, fists knotted and flailing. A thick-shouldered teamster stepped in. Voices rose and more fists lashed out. Like wildfire the quarrel spread until about ten men were slugging and cursing in a stomping, churning melee.

Summoning aid from the experienced, cooler heads who came running up, Lambert thrust his way through the fighting men. An oak-knot fist slammed into his head and knocked him spinning. A heavy boot jammed down against his left forearm.

With fighting fury, the train boss writhed aside and surged to his feet. He grabbed a swinging arm and slammed his balled shoulder into the man's solar plexus. The man gagged and went limp, and the train boss used the limp body as a flail to trip down three more of the fighting men. Then it was over, sullen faces turned their puffed and bloody features toward the iron-jawed train boss. He swung up on his roan gelding and sat looking down at them.

"Fighting like this amongst ourselves will whip us afore the redskins ever start," he clipped icily. "Maybe those painted devils figure on that." The men looked at him with sullen eyes and listened, but physical fatigue kept them from realizing the importance of what he said.

With a grim shake of his head, the train boss wheeled and rode away. He almost wished that the attack would come so there would be release from the gnawing tension of waiting. Sleepless nights and long nerve-racking days were more than flesh and blood could stand for any length of time. And if the Comanches held off their attack. . . . The high pitch of tension and apprehension would change to drugged dullness within the wagon train soon. And after that—

SIoux came back from placing outpost guards. He rode up alongside the silent train boss. Together they listened to the muted clamor of the caravan preparing itself to withstand attack should the Comanches choose this night to strike.

Finally the old scout grunted and shifted his weight. "That Thorpe woman is outside the circle," he drawled. "I told her she oughtn't to be. But she's a high-headed little filly, and that Reed snake wouldn't let her listen."

Lambert jerked around. "Julie Thorpe! Outside!"

Danger of the fiercest, most fiendish sort lurked just outside the ring of vigilant wagons. Reed's words flashed through the train boss' mind, leaving a lingering acid taste of weak fear.

"Why didn't you force her back inside where it's safe?" Lambert cried. "Reed doesn't know the Comanches. He can't look after her. You shouldn't have let them go."

The old scout shook his head. "She isn't

my squaw to beat into doing what I want, and Reed had her full of his talk."

Lambert cursed and jerked the roan gelding around in its tracks. Shoving on the reins, he sent the animal thundering along the boxed-in ring of wagons, scattering men and loose stock with the wild impetus of his charge. Purcell and Fitzpatrick leaped for safety as the roan dashed into them. Both men ran for their mounts and followed.

Lambert was oblivious to all but the seeming endless course of his race. At the Thorpe segment of the corral, he flung himself off the roan and staggered to keep a running balance.

"Where's Julie Thorpe?" he panted as he legged it toward the Thorpe drivers crouched around a mule, whose hind leg was bleeding from a bad gash. "How come you let her outside the circle?"

A lean, angular Thorpe man straightened belligerently. "You ever tried stopping Julie Thorpe from doing anything?" he queried bluntly. "She wanted to ride—so she rode. I reckon she kin choose her own company. She knows enough not to get too far away."

"If she's three feet outside these wagons, she's too far away," Lambert snapped. "Reckon you'll be right proud to tell her father you was busy tending a mule's leg and let the Comanches get her!"

Fear kindled in the teamster's dark eyes. He ran to the wagon and snatched a rifle. Then he started legging it toward a saddled horse tied to a Pittsburg wagon. But Lambert was already in the saddle and leaping his gelding across the wagon tongue.

Dark figures of horsemen showed against the skyline some half-mile to the west, and Lambert wheeled toward them. He sighed in relief that she had escaped so far. But the sigh was short; the relief but momentary. For he knew that she was not safe until she was returned to the wagon train.

A thundering beat of hooves sounded and Purcell came rocketing out from the far side of the caravan. At the sound of travel, Lambert twisted quickly, his narrowed glance taking in the figure of the hard-riding redhead. Out on the plains alone, Purcell would have plenty of opportunity to settle his score with the train boss. Lambert suddenly writhed inwardly, wondering with a sharp pang if Julie was lending herself as bait for the trap. Locking his

jaws stubbornly, he looked straight ahead and a groan escaped him. A band of dark-skinned Comanches had suddenly appeared on the far side of Curly Reed and Julie Thorpe.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outside the Circle

JULIE must have seen them the same instant Skid did, for she reined in suddenly and turned to flee. Reed rose up in his stirrups and waved his arms as he argued with her. The Comanches raced to cut off their escape, the thin prairie distances echoing to their sharp, tearing cries.

"Ride, you fools!" Lambert screamed. But the distance was too great for his words to be understood. Helplessly he watched the stark drama being enacted almost under the guns of the savages.

Julie suddenly jumped her mount and started racing toward the wagons. Reed rode up alongside and leaned over, trying to catch her reins. Her arm rose and fell as she quirted the man, and Curly veered away, his hand shielding his face. Then she was riding at a wild dead run for the wagon corral, Reed close behind her. Lambert pulled his long gun from the sheath under his leg and made ready to hold back the shrieking Comanches.

Seeing the two men racing to intercept the fleeing couple, the Comanches split up and cut to the right and left in an effort to surround them all. Purcell veered over toward the train boss with rifle ready. Julie came racing up, her eyes wide with fright. Reed's pale face was twisted and ugly, sliced by the raw red weal of her quirt. Lambert ignored the young gunman. Raising his rifle, he waited for the Comanches to ride in for a finish fight. Purcell rode up, his rifle likewise held ready. A noise came from the wagons.

"Here come some men," Julie exclaimed in a half-sob. "We'll be saved!" She laughed half-hysterically and buried her face in her hands.

Lambert didn't look at her. He watched the Comanches as they started a slow determined move toward the approaching teamsters. The click of Reed's sixguns coming to full cock sounded abrupt and loud in the strained tension.

"They'll hold their distance as long as we keep our guns loaded," Lambert said slowly. "They don't seem to want to press the fight very bad."

Even as he spoke, one of the Comanches raised a rifle and fired, the slug tearing up sand close beside Julie's mount. She shuddered soundlessly. Reed yelled shrilly and jumped his horse toward the Indians.

"Come back, you fool!" Lambert belated.

But Curly was beyond hearing—or caring. Rushing straight for the Comanches with a shrill scream of frustration and hatred, he miraculously escaped the hail of rifle slugs and arrows that met him. The Comanches wheeled and separated, unsettled by the mad attack of the lone man. Then Reed's pistols roared; a Comanche brave slipped loosely from his mount. Turning in a flurry of churned-up sand, Curly raced back toward the train boss and his stonily silent redheaded boss.

Seeing that he wasn't going to charge in among them, the remaining Comanches shrilled their rage and tore after the fleeing white man. But Lambert and Purcell raised their rifles to shoulder and kept them at a distance. Then the posse from the wagon train came within rifle range. A rattle of long shots rang out, and the Comanches wheeled and melted away into the plains.

"You're under arrest, Reed," Lambert ordered suddenly. "That killing will probably touch off the whole Comanche tribe. If you'd 'a' stayed with us they wouldn't have dared try us!"

Curly jerked with amazement and shot a sideways glance toward his boss. Purcell regarded him with brittle green eyes. Reed grew white-faced and looked away.

"And you are confined to your wagon," Lambert shoved at Julie.

She didn't raise her head, tears running the smooth line of her soft cheeks and dripping to her hands, crossed on the saddle pommel.

THE body of teamsters rode slowly and silently toward the hushed wagon corral. Lambert forced his way up alongside Julie.

"Why were you out here, Julie?" he asked gently. "These men all risked their lives to save you. Why did you make that necessary?"

A sob choked in her throat and she shook her head in misery but would not answer. They reached the wagons and the men silently fanned out toward their respective places. Purcell herded Curly ahead of him. Lambert watched the two and then stepped down at the Thorpe wagons.

"I'll have to know some answers," he said firmly. "What were you doing out there and why did you quirt Reed?"

Julie's beautiful eyes were puffy and red as she raised them.

"I—I was afraid," she whispered weakly. "Curly told me that I would be safe if I joined the Indians with him."

Lambert cursed aloud, forgetting himself and the presence of the woman.

"He said it was the wagon train the Comanches wanted—not just a woman," she hurriedly added. "But when I saw you riding to help me, and those Indians, I was afraid to join them. I wanted to come back. He—he didn't want me to."

Lambert stared at the woman in open amazement. "You mean you figured you'd be safer alone with Red than here with the wagon train?" he husked unbelievably.

His low-running rage suddenly whipped into a frothing torrent, as he remembered the way Curly Reed had kept drumming his apprehensions into the woman's ear. Small wonder that the sight of Indians frightened her out of her wits. But it was unbelievable that she would listen to him.

"What was Curly aimin' to dicker to the Comanches for your life and his?" he snapped roughly.

Julie shook her head. "I—I don't know. I—" She fell silent and covered her face again.

Wordless with anger, Lambert turned and strode through the wagon circle. At Purcell's wagons he stood spread-legged, hand close to his belt gun.

"This loose-mouthed rannihan is coming with me," he said. "I'm keeping him under guard."

Purcell's green eyes grew brittle and hard. "You ain't doin' nothing of the sort," he fumed. "Curly is my man and I need him to get my goods to Santa Fe."

Lambert saw the way the other Purcell men fanned out in readiness for trouble. He shook his head.

"Curly took Julie Thorpe out of this wagon train, with the idea of selling out

to the Comanches," he charged coldly. "He's given her the idea that the Comanches want something in this train, and—"

The stark murderous fury in Purcell's face stopped the train boss. Lambert saw that the rage wasn't directed against him, and he sensed that he'd blundered onto something with his talk. He watched the redhead closely.

"You've searched my wagons," Purcell whispered, his voice shrill with emotion. "You can again if you want. But of all the hare-brained idjits—"

"Reed was aiming to trade the Comanches something for that woman's life," the train boss cut in. "I aim to find out what afore he leaves this wagon train."

"He's my man," Purcell snarled. "I'll look out for him. I won't let him go with you or anyone else."

The train boss saw that the redhead's rage was fast getting beyond his control. "Reed isn't to leave this circle again," Lambert suddenly let down. "If he does I'll have him roped and carried the rest of the way in a wagon."

Purcell laughed thinly, his hands opening and closing as though eager to pinch down on the train boss' windpipe. Lambert turned on his heel and walked away, his back muscles tensing in expectation of a bullet or knife steel from the redhead. But none came. Then his tensed and on-edge hearing caught a soddn smacking sound. He lunged to one side and whirled, his hand falling toward his belt.

But he didn't draw. He saw Reed coming to his feet, face twisted with fear and marked red with blood. Purcell stood over him with fists cocked. Even while Lambert watched, Purcell bored in and knocked Reed a dozen feet with a roundhouse haymaker. The young gunman lurched to his knees and scuttled for the safety of the wagons, but the berserk redhead was upon him with a bound. Grabbing Reed by the collar, Purcell hoisted him upright and slammed a bonehard fist into the bloody mass of pulp that had once been a handsome face. Reed's head rolled limply and he sagged unconscious in Purcell's grip. Not a Purcell man made a move.

LAMBERT frowned in puzzlement as other teamsters ran to watch the fight. Purcell had defended Reed even to defying

the train boss. Now he was beating him to within an inch of his brash young life. Lambert started back toward the Purcell wagons, but the fight was over. Purcell slammed the limp body of Reed onto the high seat of a wagon and then stood with feet widespread, fingers hooked in his gun belt.

"Something on your mind, Lambert?" he challenged wickedly.

The train boss shook his head. There was plenty on his mind, but he couldn't get it all sorted and straightened out. And riding high on top the puzzling pile of questions was the tie-up between Purcell and Reed. Curly had revealed clearly that he stood in mortal terror of the redhead. But the imminent dangers of Comanche revenge was too strong in the train boss' mind for other worries. He forgot the redheaded trouble-causer and his motley crew.

wagon. Reed's puffed and swollen features were turned pleadingly toward the woman. Both whipped about as Lambert came up. Curly backed off a few steps.

"Get back to your wagons!" Lambert cracked. "And don't ever let me catch you here again."

Reed stood hesitant for a moment, then wheeled and fled. Without a word or glance toward the wide-eyed woman, Lambert turned and stalked back into the night, his anxiety increased a thousand-fold.

Reed knew something that threatened the wagon train, but he couldn't be scared into talking. His deadly fear of Purcell kept him locked close to that redhead's directions. And after Purcell's loud talk, Lambert wasn't going to tackle Reed and have people think he was trying to discredit him—just to gain Julie Thorpe's favor.

At his own wagons, Lambert found

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SAVE IT . . . SORT IT . . . CALL YOUR COLLECTOR

Night fell black and moonless, and again the wagon train huddled in sleepless expectancy. Lambert crawled into his blankets and sank back against the hot dry earth, but sleep did not come. Finally he roused and tugged on his moccasins. Bradshaw was gone, but Sioux sat humped in the shadows, drawing on the red stone pipe. He watched the uneasy train boss without shifting his large shaggy head.

As Skid approached the Thorpe wagons he heard a youthful voice saying, "I can save you. Nobody else in this wagon train can do you any good. But I can save you."

The train boss stopped as though confronted by a striking rattler. Reed was too serious to be resuming his light brags for benefit of a woman's heart. He really meant what he was saying. And Julie's hushed attention showed that she too felt his sincerity.

Then she said, "No. I won't listen to you any more." Her voice was taut with fear, and sharp with undisguised loathing.

Lambert stalked around the edge of the

Bradshaw talking earnestly with his smoke-wreathed partner.

"Reed knows something and is afraid for Julie Thorpe's safety," the train boss said as he finished telling them what he had overheard. "He claims that he alone can save her. But that's just a lot of wind-howl, unless he means the whole Purcell outfit."

Sioux removed his horny old thumb from the pipe bowl and let a jet of smoke spurt up into his face. "Them Comanches is playin' dead for some reason," he observed. "And it ain't to their likin' any more than mine. Them young bucks is pawin' the ground, but the chiefs won't let them attack. Now if them Injuns was figurin' on Purcell throwin' in with them, and—"

"I don't think so," Lambert confessed slowly. "I looked at Purcell's wagons and he asked me to look again. He's carrying flour and dry goods for Manuel Vargas, same as we are. I know old Manuel, a straighter Mex never lived."

"Swap loads with Purcell and you'll know for sure he ain't totin' nothing under

cover," Bradshaw grunted after a moment.

"Well, them redskins ain't playin' escort, that's for certain," Sioux snorted as Lambert shook his head. "And every day they hold off gives us a chance of meeting up with some other caravan and gettin' twice as strong. 'Tain't like them to take that chance."

The train boss was uncomfortably aware of how strange the Comanches were acting, and he was silently hoping that the caravan would run into an independent bunch of mountaineers or Mexican regulars who would throw in with the wagon train until it reached safety. But the odds were against such a happening. Again he rolled into his blankets, listening to Bradshaw whet his killing knife until sleep came.

An hour before dawn, Bradshaw shook the train boss awake. All the train lay tensed and waiting, peering into the black for the attack that might arrive at any moment.

"Get rolling," Lambert yelled. "This ain't going to last forever. And when those varmints do cut loose we'll be in for a ring-tailed party."

Breakfasts were bolted with free hands while the other held ever-present guns. Then the fires were stomped out and the wagons lined out for another day's travel. Lambert jerked his arm and the caravan started with a cursing tangle of wagons, that slowly straightened out into a line of march.

"Hey, Skid!" a husky voice bellowed. "Them Purcell wagons ain't holdin' up!"

Lambert twisted in his saddle, weary curses coming to his lips. He saw the Purcell wagons lagging back nearly half a mile, and even as he watched, Comanches appeared.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kill the Train Boss!

WITH a shrill scream of savage fury, the Comanches came pouring from little dips and hollows that roiled the prairie's level surface. Purcell and his crew fired a few random shots into the charging redskins, but the warriors kept coming. Then Purcell's crew leaped to their horses and abandoned the wagons to the Indians. Purcell likewise managed to get astride his

horse, and with his men he rode desperately for the wagon train which was hurriedly throwing itself into a circle.

At first sight of the Indians, Lambert had whipped into action. Riding down the wagon train at a dead run, he had collected a fighting crew of some thirty men even as the wagons formed the circle. Then leading the way, Lambert sent his men straight for the abandoned Purcell wagons. A volley of shots greeted him, felling a horse to his left. Then the Lambert crowd of experienced frontiersmen opened a withering volley fire.

Comanches went down with high-pitched agony. Skid saw a lean, brawny brave climb to the seat of the nearest wagon and struggle with the unfamiliar reins. Lambert's rifle swung about to cover the copper chest and jumped. The Comanche melted away. Then Bradshaw's old Hawkins rifle roared and a nearly headless form sagged beneath the chopping hooves of a rearing wagon team of mules.

The white men were then in the thick of it, swinging their rifles like clubs, until the steel barrels were red and matted with black hairs. Before their savage attack, the Comanches began giving way.

"Take the wagons into the corral," Lambert yelled.

Men whose horses had been cut from beneath them scrambled into the lurching, bucking wagons and sawed the reins, heading the frightened teams toward the corraled wagon train. The Indians, seeing their gains wrested from them, wheeled about and came screaming back. Reinforcements poured from the distant coulees and draws like ferocious black ants, materializing into savage horsemen. But the wagons were fleeing, and Lambert led his men in a fighting retreat for the wagon train.

A St. Vrain driver sagged over his mount's neck, blood spouting from his throat. Lambert reined over and grabbed the frantic mount's bridle, guiding it toward the circle. Then the Comanches surged forward. A rattling barrage whipped smoke and flame from the wagons. The ranks of the redskins broke before the well-aimed fire. The Indians drew back and Lambert saw with relief that they were well within protective rifle range of the wagon train corral.

Wearily he sagged in the saddle, and be-

came conscious of a warm seepage making his shoulder hot and sticky. The men left at the train cut loose with a long-range volley that sent the Comanches scurrying out of sight. Then they reappeared, circling well out of range. Occasionally an Indian would charge in toward the wagons, fire his ancient rifle or discharge his arrows and flee for safety.

"You're hurt," Julie Thorpe said softly as Lambert led his gelding in between two barricaded wagons.

The train boss looked at her, noting the soft overtones of her voice. He started to shake his head and felt a stiffening of muscles, that and a sharp pull of pain. He started to say that it was nothing, looking over his shoulder to see the extent of his wound. For the first time he became aware that an arrow jutted from the thick muscles of his back. Nodding, he strode past the woman, and over to where Sioux and Hank were doctoring the wounded of the foray. They'd had long experience with arrow wounds, and they cut the arrow out of him in short order.

"That redheaded snake ain't very pleased that we saved his wagons," Bradshaw muttered as he shoved a plug of Missouri eatin' tobacco against the raw wound in Lambert's back. "He warn't even sayin' thank-ee, last I heard."

SKID LAMBERT closed his eyes against the sharp sting of the tobacco against his raw flesh.

Sioux Klemming's harsh snarl jerked his eyes open.

"Looking at a white man's blood—something you don't find in your crew," the old scout snarled.

Reed was standing white-faced and worried across from the crouching oldtimer. Reed jerked at the old man's words but made no show of fight. His face was pinched and drawn, and his eyes held an unseeing blankness. Without a word he wheeled and walked heavily away.

"That hombre's seein' something that's curling his innards," Bradshaw said slowly. "Reckon it's what he was warning Julie Thorpe about?"

Lambert jerked and sank back at the bite of pain in his shoulder and back. Then he got to his feet.

"Reckon we're in for it at dawn," he said, waiting for the scouts to back his judgment with their own, wider knowledge.

"All hell won't stop them," Sioux agreed slowly. "And they's enough to make it a touch-and-go fracas unless we has good luck of some kind."

"And maybe even luck won't do us enough good," Bradshaw muttered ominously. Lambert drifted away into the lengthening shadows that a westerly sun cast across the circle. The Comanches held them ringed in and motionless. And whenever the savages were so minded, they would make their screaming dash against the caravan. Only a lot of good luck and hard, straight shooting would enable the wagon train to hold out.

As if at Lambert's words, a shrill, raging chorus of voices sounded from the south and east, rising sharp and ugly against the throb of rifle fire and pounding hooves. Men within the circle of wagons called excitedly or knelt in grim intent behind spitting rifles. The Comanches were testing the wagon train's strength.

Running awkwardly, Lambert found his own wagons, thrust his rifle through the spokes of the big wheel and waited. The Comanches came circling in, riding wide around the train, then wheeling in within gunshot to loosen their loads.

"Pass along the word to get their horses," Lambert shouted to the nearest man. "Those cayuses make bigger targets and will cripple an attack just as much as loss of Indians will."

The order was shouted along the train to the next wagon where it was again relayed on. And as the men obeyed, horses began to rear and fall in the deadly ring that revolved around the circle. The Indians loosened their ring and rode beyond gunshot of the train, then as if at a signal pulled out and rode off into the hills that hid the distant Arkansas River.

With a whistle of pent-up breath, Lambert laid aside his warm rifle after reloading it and set off down the train to inspect the damages. The attack had been a light testing foray, but several of the whites would never again make a day's drive or fire another shot. They sagged against the huge high wheels or lay face up under the broad bellies of the Pittsburg wagons. And a few more were calmly staunching the flow of

crimson from fresh arrow or gun wounds.

"Unload some of the bales!" Lambert ordered the caravan, "and block up the wheels. Those fiends of hell will attack at dawn, and we won't need worry about that stuff if they once get in."

Purcell yelled protest. "This flour and stuff ain't mine, it belongs to Manuel Vargas. I'm just hauling it through for him. I can't unload his stuff."

Lambert eyed the lanky redhead. Most of the freight men, like himself, owned the goods on their wagons and were shipping it through at their own risk. It was consigned to Santa Fe, but any loss enroute was stood by the drivers. But Purcell might not be working that way.

"Let's unload it, Red," Curly shrieked. His peaked face seemed sallow and drawn with an undercurrent of fear. "If Bloody Lance tries to get in here—"

Purcell spun and slashed a fist savagely into the cowering young gunman's face. Reed staggered back, his hands held over his face, but he hadn't the courage to fight back or to keep on talking. Then Purcell whipped around to face Lambert.

"Those wagons of mine stand pat," the redhead announced grimly. "I'll kill the first man that tries unloading them out here."

Lambert faced him calmly while his pulse leaped to a feverish beat. Reed had called the Comanche chieftain by name, something that only Sioux, Hank and the train boss knew. Now Purcell refused to unload his wagons. And Reed had told Julie that the Comanches would be more interested in the wagon train than in a lone woman!

"We'll let a council decide it," Lambert said. "And if they say yes, your wagons will be unloaded!"

Purcell snarled soundlessly like the mute grimace of a cornered catamount. When Lambert turned away, Purcell was right at his elbow.

"I'll hear it all," he growled. "You ain't going to stack the deck on me. I'll hear all you say from now on."

LAMBERT nodded and led the Purcell leader toward the far end of the circle. Purcell's four gun-hung renegades slunk along behind their boss, leaving only Reed nursing his fist-battered face. With Sioux

and Hank backing his judgment, Lambert told of the danger from fire arrows, and suggested that the wagons unload their inflammable material and block the gaps between and under the wheels. Purcell wouldn't listen. He stomped away.

"Hold up, Red!" Lambert called softly.

Purcell turned with a snarl. Skid held his belt gun level with his waist, the black bore centering on Purcell's twisting face. Bradshaw's old Hawkins rifle and Klemmings long-gun also swung carelessly along the line of Purcell gunmen.

"Don't make any bad moves, Purcell," Lambert said. "We're running this train. And we think that the safety of the corral depends as much upon your wagons as upon ours."

Purcell crouched, his hand falling toward his belt. But Lambert's ready pistol clicked to full cock and stopped the redhead cold. Fuming and raging, Purcell was led away while anxious caravan men lifted the flour barrels and bales of drygoods from Purcell's high sided wagons. The train boss watched carefully, but he noticed nothing out of the order.

"Maybe you can answer to Manuel Vargas," Purcell raged shrilly.

Lambert turned a grim face toward his crew. "Maybe Purcell is right," he murmured. "Shove his stuff in the center of the corral. You can pile my flour barrels around his wagons."

The men hurried off. The wagon train slowly assumed a solid appearance of strength as every opening and cavity between, around, and under the wagons was filled in. Rifles jutted in silent vigilance from the fortification. Then it was completed and men lay waiting in tense, strained silence. The sun sagged lower and lower to drop out of sight in a mist of purple flame.

Slowly the night wore on. Guards were relieved, but there was no relief from the building tension as each man tried to picture what the dawn would bring. Lambert pressed himself into the hot dusty grasses and stared with aching eyes out into the black. A scant sixty feet away, the wagon train was silent and dark as a lightning-blasted log, but he knew that other eyes ached and strained to penetrate the gloom. And prowling the night with the blood-thirsty ferocity of wolves, Comanche warriors were setting themselves for a des-

perate assault on the cornered wagon train.

The faint gleam of stars paled into pre-dawn. Lambert inched his way back toward the dark shelter of the caravan. Then he froze motionless and tense.

"Just keep inching," a low voice husked from the darkness at his shoulder. "But remember—one bad move gets this blade into your guts!"

For a long moment, Lambert lay motionless, wondering if he dared make a sudden play. He could whip about and arouse the wagon train, but Purcell would have his steel inches deep in the train boss' back. And Purcell had savvy enough not to try crawling up on the train boss. He'd just lain in the darkness between Lambert and the wagon train and waited until Skid started crawling back. A man with frontier savvy like that would be pretty apt to slip back inside the caravan unnoticed even should the train boss draw attention by selling his life.

Slowly, Lambert crept toward the wagons. Once he reached them, he'd— Before he could give further thought to a plan, the earth rose up and exploded in his face, blinding him, smothering his breath. With a sigh he sagged low, vaguely aware that Purcell hunkered over him with pistol poised for a shot should anyone in the wagons cry out. Then the night swirled in with cloying blackness.

THE train boss heard a muted roar of many voices raised in argument for a long time before he fully realized just where he was, and what had happened. His head pulsed with dull pain and he found that he was powerless to move. Leather thongs wrapped his ankles and wrists and drew his legs up behind his back so that he couldn't even kick against the wagon load and make enough noise to be detected. His jaws ached from the wad of dirty rag that gagged him, and he stared upward at the piled bales of dry goods, wondering what Purcell intended doing with him.

"Lit a shuck," Purcell's voice blared in the thin early morning air. "Afeerd of a fight, so they pulled out."

"Wait an hour afore starting," Bradshaw's low voice argued. "That'll give us a chance to see what them Injins aim on doin'. And it'll give Lambert a chance to get back to us."

Purcell laughed thinly. The train boss strained at the bounds holding him. The old scouts were dead right in their caution, but only the train boss could order the wagon corral held. Purcell was playing on that, and was aiming on getting his wagons underway. Lambert flopped over and became wedged on his belly.

Boots clattered against dry ground with a soft thunking noise. "I've got my wagons half loaded already," Purcell stormed. "I aim to finish the job and pull out. Ain't no gain in settin' here like a crippled partridge."

There was more sound of talk and Purcell's grating laughter that cut the morning like a rusty file. Then the wagon lurched and turned creakingly. Lambert groaned within himself as he felt Purcell's outfit leave the wagon corral.

"Roost here till doomsday," he heard the redhead yell tauntingly back at the wagon train.

Then the jolting resumed, and the train boss knew that he was being carried away by the redheaded renegade. Lambert arched his back and pulled until the thongs cut into his flesh. Black circles floated before his straining eyes and he felt his pulse throb through his temples. But the thongs did not give a fraction of an inch. Slowly the lean figure sagged in panting defeat. He'd tried his best, but the redhead held the upper hand now. And whatever Purcell had in mind to do, there was no one to stop him.

After what seemed hours of jolting, the wagon stopped. Bales of cloth were shifted around, and then the kidnapped train boss caught a flash of bright. Straining his eyes to one side, he caught a fleeting glimpse of Purcell's leering features outlined against the white sky.

"You'll make a nice present for Bloody Lance, Lambert," the redhead grated. "And after he gets what else I've got for him I reckon you'll be seeing lots of your friends in Bloody Lance's camp."

Lambert could not hold his tortured position with his eyes rolled far to one side. He looked away from the smirking redhead in helpless fury as he listened to the outlaw brag about what would happen to the caravan.

Curly stood beside the outlaw leader. "What about the girl?" he chimed in. "I

want her myself. Bloody Lance won't—"

"Bloody Lance will do what he pleases with her," Purcell snarled. "You and your soft talk with that woman damned near spoiled everything. If there'd 'a' been any train boss but this one thick-headed Lambert we'd be in a pickle by now. Talking how you could save her—and how deadly dangerous things were going to get!"

The redhead growled his disgust, and Lambert twisted his head, rolling his eyes until he could get a glimpse of the sky and the outlaws. Purcell turned away, but Reed still stood. The youthful desperado's face was putty-colored and twisted with fear.

"I ain't goin' on, Red," he whined weakly. "If them braves remember that I shot—"

"Get back on that wagon seat!" Purcell ordered. "You're going to help deliver the goods to Bloody Lance same as you're being paid to do. I reckon he won't let one warrior or two spoil our little dealings."

Lambert couldn't see what Reed did, but Purcell suddenly shouted: "All right! All right! I'll go ahead. You bring the last wagon."

CHAPTER SIX

Traitor's Treasure

THE train boss remembered Julie traveling with the train caravan. And his jaws knotted as he heard again the red-headed outlaw's calloused tones. Lambert well knew what treatment Julie, or any white woman, would receive at the hands of Bloody Lance. In his raging fury the train boss locked his jaws and fought the gag until the sides of his face twisted half numb. But finally the gag was a loose wad of fragments that he pushed through his frayed lips with swollen tongue.

"You're sure letting your girl get away without making a squawk," the train boss yelled suddenly. "Turning her over to a blood-crazy Indian!"

The wagon lurched to a stop, and Reed shoved the bales away from Lambert. His pinched blue eyes stared down at the bound figure with a harried desperation. The young outlaw licked his dry lips nervously.

"You're supposed to be gagged," he said sullenly. "How'd you work that gag clear?"

"And you're supposed to be a white man," Lambert charged hotly. "What kind of a skunk are you to let a passel of Comanches fight over your woman?"

Reed turned even whiter, his lips jerking and twitching with terror. "I can't help it," he gasped slowly. "I can't help it."

Lambert snorted, surging against his bonds until his heart pounded. But there was no give. Despite his overwhelming fear, Curly wasn't going to make a play to save Julie. Skid kept tossing the bait at him, but the craven little outlaw was too afraid to try it.

"What do you think'll happen to you?" Lambert raged. "You think Bloody Lance'll let you beef his fighting men without making a move? Hells afire, he'll be toasting your shins over a slow fire afore he even looks at that wagon train."

"Shut up!" Reed screeched in a half frenzy. "I'm following Purcell!"

The outlaw disappeared from the rim of the wagon box; his voice shrilled at the mules. Lambert felt the wagon lurch into motion and his own hopes skidded lower and lower. He didn't need to be told what his own reception in Bloody Lance's camp would be.

"See anything of Bloody Lance yet?" he called above the whine of turning wheels. "He'll come quick when he gets ready. Kinda let me know."

Curly didn't answer, but whipped the team to a faster gait.

"Watch them fellows close," Lambert kept yelling. "Them Comanches come out of nowhere just like a streak of forked lightning when they're after a scalp."

The wagon jerked to a halt. "What'll I do?" Reed's voice suddenly quavered. "I—I can't face those Indians when they know I shot. . . ."

"Back to the safety of the caravan," Lambert said quietly. "Bloody Lance can't take that wagon train without an awful fight. He could wipe you and Purcell out like a fly, but the caravan is something tougher."

There was a long moment of silence. Lambert twisted in his cramped position, wondering what the outlaw youth was doing. Then the wagon jerked into motion and wheeled around.

"Hurry," Lambert yelled, but his words weren't needed.

THE fright-crazed outlaw whipped the team to a lumbering gallop that threatened to capsize the oversized freight wagon at any moment. Deep in the pile of shifting, shrieking bales and barrels of goods, Lambert smiled grimly. His arms and legs were numb from the tight bonds that wrapped them. He was utterly helpless. And if the load shifted enough to throw a bale or crate upon him, there wouldn't be a spark of life left in him. But the cowardly outlaw was driving fast for the safety of the wagon train, and he'd spill everything to Bradshaw or Sioux even if the train boss was crushed.

Lambert tossed and bounced, straining his ears for sounds of shouting or shots which would signify Purcell's discovery of Reed's treachery. But there was no sound above the rumbling clatter of the careening wagon and the pound of hooves. Then Lambert caught the faint whisper of a distant shout, a pulsation of saddle horses and the hoarse yelp of Sioux Klemming. They'd reached the caravan.

While Reed babbled and cringed, Lambert was lifted from the wagon and his bonds cut away. Then while he worked circulation back into his numbed hands and feet, Purcell's wagon was driven into the still corralled train.

"Purcell's delivering something to Bloody Lance," the train boss told his scouts. "I think it's guns, but I ain't sure. He's . . ."

"Here he comes now!" Bradshaw spat. "Cutting a trail for here like his suspenders was afire."

Lambert directed two of the McCullough men to take Reed behind the nearest wagon. He slipped his pistol into his belt and followed. Then, still kneading his wrists where the thongs had cut into the flesh, he waited for the distant figures to come galloping up to the wagons.

"Comanches!" Purcell yelled while still far distant from the wagons. "Comanches. They jumped my wagons and shot the mules!"

A surge of caravan teamsters went to meet the bellowing redhead and two of his men. Purcell pulled up and twisted in the saddle to stare back along his trail in feigned anxiety.

"Them Comanches come up from a holler atween two knolls," he mouthed, tugging at

his sandy mustache and waving the other hand in nervous jerks toward the horizon. "And afore we could . . ."

His green eyes widening, the redhead stared in blank disbelief as Lambert stepped painfully around the wagon. Then the redhead's face twisted in demoniac fury as he realized that his treachery was found out. A tight, strained silence fell and Curly came into sight, prodded by the two grim McCullough teamsters. The young gunman stopped abruptly upon seeing Purcell, all his cockiness long drained out of him.

Man to man, Purcell and the train boss stood with eyes locked. Then a distant feather of rocketing hooves began beating into the silence of the determined group. One or two of the teamsters looked out into the prairie. The rest kept their attention glued to the fatal contest inching toward its bloody finale between Purcell and Lambert.

"Hell, it's one of your men, Purcell," a gruff voice shouted; then added in a whisper,—"or was a man."

Then the mount was close enough for all to see the gory, tortured hulk of living agony that had once been a Purcell wagon driver. The man was pinned to his saddle with arrows, a loop of rawhide fastening his neck to the saddle horn. His noseless, earless head was a welter of blood.

"No—guns," the poor creature muttered fixedly. "—No—guns—"

Reed stared in horror at the wounded man and then sagged to the ground, his twitching face greenish with the terror that filled him. Purcell was shaken, his glance wavering toward the muttering hulk that was being tenderly lifted down from his bloody saddle.

"Here they come!" Sioux grunted, his hoarse voice running half across the caravan. "Dig your holes and show your teeth."

"Protect us, Lambert," the Purcell men suddenly begged in unison. "Don't let them . . ."

Lambert waved them inside the wagon circle and they dove for the meager protection of the grouped wagons with an eagerness that was too intense for make-believe. Without a word, Purcell followed them between two high wagons and the opening was closed with two huge boxes of hardware.

"Watch them," Lambert ordered blunt-

ly, "and at the first false move . . ." He didn't finish but there was no misunderstanding his meaning.

"Hold your fire!" Lambert shouted as the Comanches lined out in black fury against the skyline, magnifying their might by the sweeping, breast-on attack. "They can't face volley fire! I'll give the word!"

THE prairie suddenly echoed and resounded to the shrill din of many savage throats voicing their hatreds. The Comanches came down closer to the wagons, riding recklessly like the unmatched horsemen they were, spreading and weaving the one rank of their attack until they seemed to number thousands. Then they suddenly launched down against the stubborn little caravan as though to sweep over the wagons with the sheer might of their horseflesh and bestial shrieking.

Lambert watched them swoop in, seemingly springing from the very earth itself. He lined his sights on a black-daubed face and waited until he could distinguish the warrior's coarse features. Then he pressed trigger and felt his rifle snuggle back against his shoulder. The Comanche was gone, and a sheet of rifle fire laced out from the wagons. Comanches went down, but others forged in and filled the gaps. Again the wagon train danced with muzzle flames.

Beside Lambert's shoulder, old Sioux coolly lined sights, fired, and repeated the process, an old and tried, unrattled killing machine. Still the Comanches pressed in, screaming until the very air throbbed and rang with their hideous cries. Then the attack melted away and the Comanches withdrew to reform their shattered ranks.

"We scraped the doors o' hell that time," Hank Bradshaw muttered as he reloaded his Hawkins rifle.

Lambert nodded without speaking. He knew how dangerously close to breasting the wagons that charge had been. And as his harried glance took in the interior of the wagon train, he saw how costly it had been to his own forces.

"Get shotguns," he snapped tersely. "We won't hold another charge like that one." And even as he spoke the wheeling circle of savages began tightening and closing in on the now dangerously undermanned caravan.

Men too badly hit to fire a rifle lay in the

welter of their own blood and loaded guns for those still able to fire; cursing and falling limply, to be dragged away and their places taken at the smoking rifles. Arrows pin-cushioned the train, whipping and snapping from taut-strung bows. Indian ponies reared and fell but still closer and closer ground the shrieking redskins, hanging low over their mounts and charging straight into the gun-flaming maw of the raging hell that had been a wagon train.

Lambert dropped his empty rifle and whipped out his belt gun as a lean, snarling redskin leaped his pony hard against the bulwark behind which the train boss was crouched. Lambert grabbed the muscled red thigh with his left hand and jabbed his beltgun upward against the Indian's side. The warrior swung a murderous blow with an axe and started to roll to the far side of his mount. Lambert pulled trigger and the Indian slumped.

McCullough crept up, his right arm dangling limp and bloody. "We're low on shot a'ready," he husked. "Where's them guns you was talkin' about?"

Skid turned toward the grizzled old prairie freight hauler. "Creeping blazes," he snorted. "I plumb forgot about them." Then he looked across the besieged caravan, at the milling mules and oxen whose mounting fright made them an increasing danger within the caravan. "I don't know. Where's that Purcell bunch? They know and they'll talk, or I'll carve their ribs with my pelt knife right here!"

Old McCullough pointed with his good hand. "Reed is holed in there by Fitzpatrick and he's scared to death. As long as there's a good man at each shoulder he keeps bustin' caps, but he caves every-time one of them gets it."

"Threaten to shove him outside the wagons," Lambert ordered brutally. "He'll spill his guts. These Comanches got him filled with the fear o' hell for certain. He'll tell everything he knows. But don't let Purcell stand near."

McCullough crawled away. The fire on the left was getting stronger and the redskins were getting in closer, laying low behind their dead mounts and pouring a hail of unaimed musket balls into the wagons.

Then a woman's shrill, piercing scream rang high and cutting above the general

bedlam of the fracas. Lambert felt his very bone-marrow creep at the utter horror that shredded the scream. He saw Julie wrestling with a warrior, saw the others swarming across the wagon and launching themselves upon the Fitzpatrick haulers. McCullough staggered back only to go down with half his head torn away by a wide-swinging Comanche axe.

CURLY REED stood limply watching the hell unfold around him, but his fear-weakened arms refused to hold up the two sixguns he had so bravely carried before the caravan ever reached Indian country. Even when Julie was swung clear of the ground by a bronze prairie giant and carried toward the gap between the wagons, Reed was too paralyzed by horror to offer the feeblest resistance.

His lips locked in desperation, Lambert launched himself across the corner of the circle and into the blood-drenched melee of Indians and teamsters. The belt gun in his right fist spat flame full into the face of a leaping warrior. Before the redskin had time to wilt, the train boss' right hand had pumped his pelt knife into the Indian's chest.

Thrusting and chopping, jabbing with the bloodied steel and lashing out with the equally bloodied pistol, he waded into the

packed jam of locked bodies and cut his way through. Steel ran a sliver of cold fire into his side muscles; a back-handed axe blow hit his shoulder like a mule kick and drained the strength away. Then Julie saw him coming and renewed her struggles.

The redskin making off with Julie turned, his thick dark lips twisted and snarling with fury as he heard the heavy steps of the train boss. The warrior threw the woman down at his feet with breath-taking force and leaped at the hatchet-faced white man. The Indian's knife flicked out savagely. Thrust onward by the very impetus of his rush, Lambert lurched aside, throwing his left arm across his chest. The steel went deep, and the train boss sagged, his arm muscles fouling the redskin's blade and holding it. Then Lambert thrust upward with the last of his waning strength, watching with the grim satisfaction as the knife hilt slammed into the coppery skin.

The savage straightened with a grunt and stiffly his dead weight toppled across the prostrate form of Julie, blood spilling like grain from a broken sack.

Weak and sick, Lambert sagged to his knees, feebly trying to reload his belt gun that had dropped from his useless left arm. Then a sudden change in battle noise came to his ear. The sullen boom of cap-and-ball rifle fire was thrust aside and a new



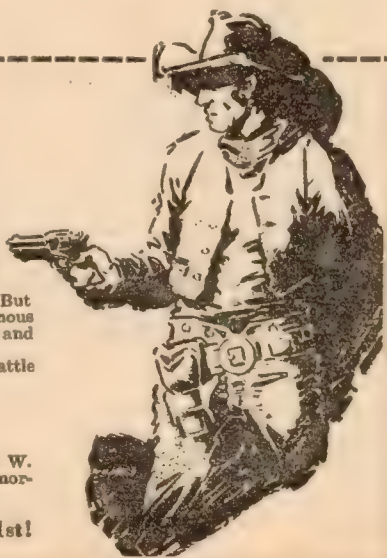
LAST OF THE STOCK THIEF REBELS

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sharper crack of paper-cartridge repeaters took up the lethal chant. Torturously the train boss raised his head, his bleary sight registering the confusion that the remaining redskins within the caravan felt. Shrieking, the few remaining Comanches whirled in mad endeavor to escape and were relentlessly cut down by the very repeating rifles that were intended for their own use against the whites.

The new rifles were turned outward, withering the already weakened and faltering attack of the Comanches. Then the redskins whirled and rode out into the prairie. Quiet came to the caravan, quiet except for the moaning of the wounded.

Gentle hands hoisted Lambert to his feet and he numbly watched Sioux deftly whip a bone needle and bit of deer tendon through his raw flesh in closing the gaping knife wounds.

"Julie?" Lambert asked anxiously. "Julie Thorpe?"

"Knocked out by that Comanche," Sioux Klemming said stolidly. "But ain't no bones broke. She'll be raring for a courtin' in two, three days."

Relief swept the train boss as he heard that Julie was unhurt and new strength began bubbling from the depths of his vitality. Confidence now in the victorious outcome of any further Indian attack hung like a blanket of vitalizing fresh air over the wagon train. Even the horror of the dead and dying was made more bearable by the flush of joyous optimism. Lambert felt his reloaded beltgun thrust into its holster.

"Those were Purcell's rifles?"

"In the flour barrels," Hank Bradshaw nodded. "And cartridges wrapped in bolts of cloth. Purcell didn't know that his stuff wasn't stacked around his wagons. You remember that you put your barrels there, so that his stuff shouldn't be damaged. He loaded up your flour and drygoods and then let Bloody Lance take it. But I reckon ol' Bloody Lance wasn't satisfied with barrels o' nothin' but flour."

TIGHT-EYED now that he knew for a certainty, Skid Lambert looked again at the havoc wrought on the caravan. His lips turned hard and thin with hatred for the whites who would sell out their own

kind to the Comanches for whatever little gold they got for their outlaw guns. Grimly he turned toward the silent figure of Reed.

A shout arose from across the caravan, hoarse and half-wild with emotion. Then Purcell's lean, tigerish figure could be seen astride a horse as the renegade made his desperate bid for freedom. Bradshaw swept up the Hawkin's rifle and swung it toward the redhead.

"Don't shoot!" Lambert called quickly.

The train boss stepped out in the open and called to the cornered renegade. "I'm over here, Purcell!"

With a savage scream of hatred, the redhead threw himself flat along his mount's neck, his hand flashing back and jutting forward with a flaming pistol. At the first crack, Reed cried out and slumped limply. Lambert flashed his own hand beltward as the outlaw whirled his horse and spurred toward him. Lambert raised his pistol and looked along the barrel. A crushing weight smashed into him, knocking him sideways.

The train boss braced himself against the solid warm planks of a wagon box and fired twice. Purcell leered stupidly, still leaning along his mount's neck while his shirt grew dark and moist; then the outlaw slipped to the ground like a length of loose limp chain.

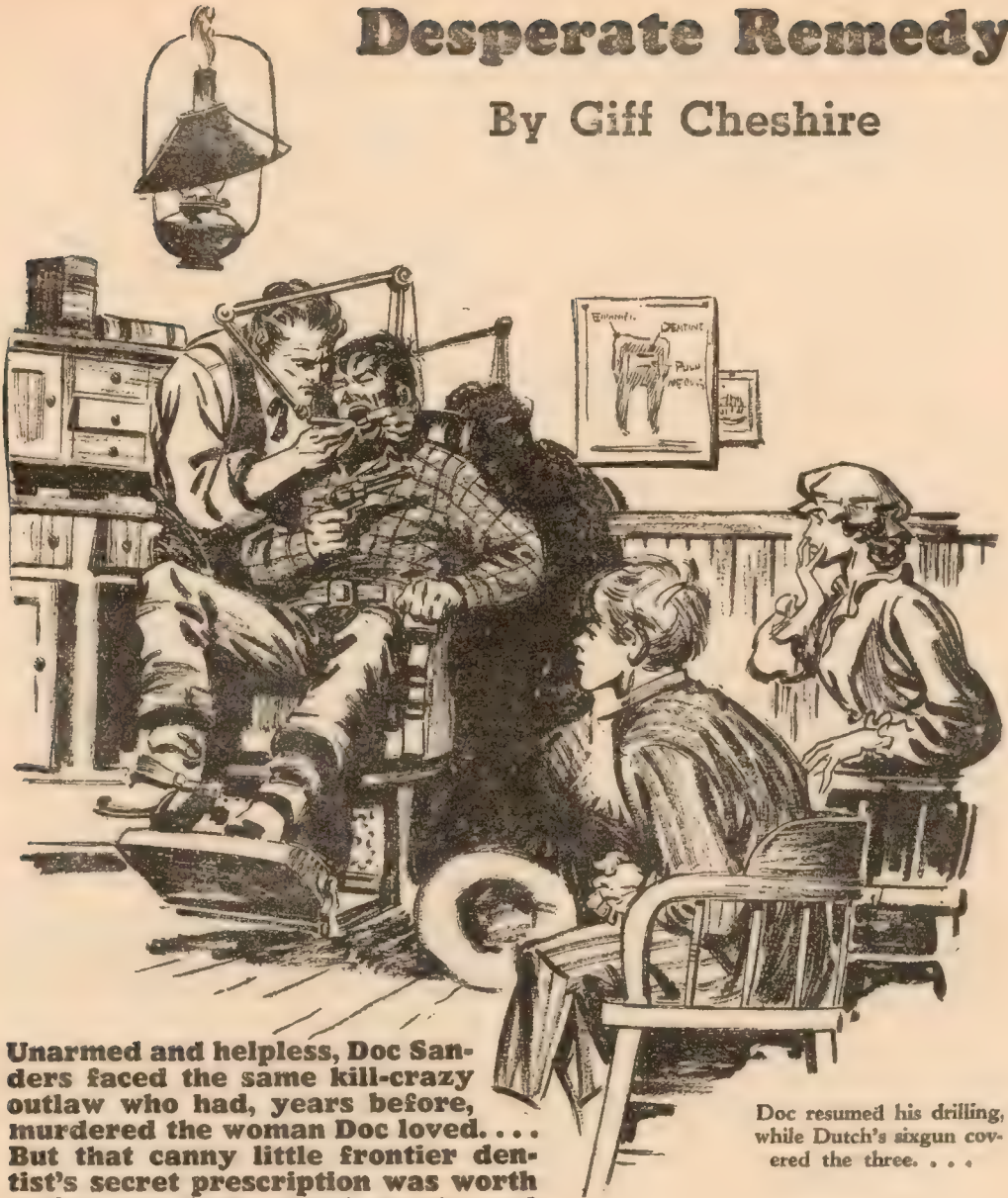
"This Reed snake is dead—shot plumb center," Sioux grunted. "And you had to play brave and get yourself another hurt." The old scout's scolding sounded gruff but a warm light showed in his old eyes. "I suppose you want to brag about killin' that redhead when you make your soft-talk to the Thorpe woman."

Teeth knit hard against the new pain, Lambert turned a proud look over the caravan he had to take through to Santa Fe. Then the train boss felt his eyes swinging to meet another pair, a soft pair that were blue with question and anxiety and warm with an expression that set his heart to thumping. Slowly he allowed a tight grin to play across his lips as Julie Thorpe came forward with a basin of water and fresh bandages for his wounded side and arm. And he almost caught himself wishing that he had more places to bandage. This was one part of the battle he was going to like.

THE END

Desperate Remedy

By Giff Cheshire



Unarmed and helpless, Doc Sanders faced the same kill-crazy outlaw who had, years before, murdered the woman Doc loved. . . . But that canny little frontier dentist's secret prescription was worth trying on both dead teeth and deadlier gunmen!

Doc resumed his drilling, while Dutch's sixgun covered the three. . . .

THE KNOCK on the back door was so low that Doc Sanders did not hear it the first time. It came again, louder. The dentist laid down his book with a sigh and heaved himself to his feet. His tall, thin body arched in a stoop as he moved across the room. After he had been sitting for a time, the old bullet wound always stiffened up his back. Doc passed on through the

kitchen and opened the door to the back porch.

A tall stranger hulked in the shadows. He brushed his way past Doc, moving into the darkness of the kitchen. Doc frowned. It was his sister Mary's kitchen, now, gleaming clean, the way Emma had always kept it. This man looked coarse and out of place in it. Doc did not like his looks any

better than he did his vulgar manners. "You alone?" the man asked, his voice a heavy whisper.

Doc nodded. "Except for my boy and my sister. They're asleep. What do you want?" He knew without asking. Through the stubble of beard he could see that the man's right cheek was badly swollen. An abscessed tooth.

"Pull your blinds down, Doc!"

"They're down."

The man moved on into the sitting room, his restless eyes checking the windows to make certain Doc had not lied about the blinds. Doc's gaze rested on the two low-slung guns, both thonged to massive thighs, and felt a shudder travel up his back. They were evil-looking things, mutely telling their own story of a long and bloody back-trail. Doc's gaze traveled up again to rest upon the man's face. He caught his breath.

The stranger shoved back his hat, and lamplight did things to his face. It started a rush of memory in Doc, who felt his knees suddenly go weak.

The man noticed that and grinned. "You don't need to be so scared, Doc. Do what I tell you, and nothing'll happen to you. Just don't try any smart tricks!"

"I'm not scared," Doc replied. Nor was he. Only surprised—and filled suddenly with a desire to kill. Ten years had changed Dutch but little.

Doc knew his name because another outlaw had blurted it out in the excitement, that day long before when the bank had been held up. In a blur of memory, much of that scene came into Doc's mind now.

"Get that fool cashier, Dutch!" the other bandit had yelled. "He's got a hogleg!"

The crash of guns, the fumes of powder, and then old Jake Langley sliding from view beyond the wicket. Possibly there had been some excuse for shooting Jake Langley, for the testy oldster had gone for his gun.

Nothing could excuse what followed. Doc and Emma had been in the bank when the holdup took place. They had quietly obeyed every command the bandits gave them. They saw Jake Langley go down and still did not move, for Doc had never carried a gun. Perhaps Dutch had considered it necessary to kill off all the witnesses, possibly it was nothing more than blood-lust roused by killing Jake. Doc could still re-

member the gleam that came to Dutch's eyes as he backed out the door. Doc saw the gun-barrel swinging toward them. He hurled himself in front of Emma.

THE rest had been told to him, afterward. He had gone down under the bandit's first shot, his abdomen pierced by the slug that buried itself close to his spine. Dutch's next two shots found Emma. She had been buried a long time before Doc knew all the story, and Mary had come from the East to take care of Doc and three-year-old Danny.

Mary and Danny, who was now thirteen, were in bed and, Doc hoped, soundly asleep. He regretted having told Dutch about them, yet the outlaw probably would have guessed and it would make the situation worse to be caught in a lie. While Doc had been reviewing his bitter memories, he had gone into his dental office and lighted the kerosene lamp in there. Dutch followed, viewing each movement suspiciously. Doc jerked his head toward the chair beside the foot-treadle drill.

"Sit down, and I'll take a look at that molar."

Dutch hesitated an instant before he took the seat. He drew a sixgun, and when he finally sat down he held it threateningly in his lap. Yet Doc was sure Dutch had not recognized him. Memories of many killings must have laid themselves over that one, ten years before. Or if he did remember, he would probably believe that Doc had died under those merciless guns, too. Doc stepped around behind the chair, his natural position when examining a patient's mouth.

"Hold on, there!" Dutch snapped. "You stay in front of me, mister!"

Doc shrugged. "It'll make it awkward for me to work, and it'll hurt you more. But it's your tooth." He had the gloomy realization that if anything really spooked this suffering animal, he would use that gun ruthlessly again. He wondered if it was the same gun that had shot him and Emma. Revulsion surged through him again.

This burning desire to avenge his wife had been with the Doc a long while, but never in ten years had he felt it as strongly as now.

Doc located the infected molar at a

glance. Yet when he spoke to Dutch about it, he lied deliberately. "The whole side of your mouth's infected, but I won't pull any teeth. I'll bore through and let out the pus. That'll stop the pain."

Dutch seemed relieved. He probably had been dreading the extractions. Doc noticed that he relaxed a little.

"I can't help hurting you, though," Doc went on, "so don't get proddy when I do. I'll let out the pus and disinfect the cavities, and you probably won't have any more trouble."

Doc put his foot on the treadle and set the drill going. Dutch winced from the vibration of the burr on the sensitive molar.

"Got a patient, Pop?"

Doc straightened, his heart standing still. Danny stood in the doorway in his flannel night-shirt. Dutch brushed Doc aside with a sweep of his arm and bolted upright in the chair, his eyes stabbing toward Danny, his fingers on the sixgun. For an awful instant Doc thought he was going to have to throw himself on the man to keep him from using it.

"What're you doing up, son?" Doc asked sternly.

"Got dry," Danny answered. "Had to have a drink." His eyes rested on Dutch's lap. "Say mister, you holding a gun on my Pop?"

"He—he was just showing it to me, Danny!" Doc cut in hastily. "You get your drink and run on back to bed."

"No he don't!" Dutch growled. "That squirt ain't going to have a chance to run outside and rouse the town! Nor your wife, either. Get 'em both in here, where I can watch 'em!"

"The woman," Doc said, after a deep breath, "is my sister. I lost my wife—many years ago."

He thought it best to do what Dutch said. He called Danny into the room and told him to sit in one of the chairs along the wall. He hurried in to rouse Mary. She

knew something was wrong the instant she opened her eyes. Doc whispered to her. He had to admire Mary. She was frightened, but there was proud defiance in the way she marched into the dental office in her old Mother Hubbard and took a chair beside Danny. Dutch watched every move carefully, ready to fire his sixgun at the slightest provocation.

DOC resumed his drilling, while Dutch's eyes played over the three of them constantly. The awful thought came to Doc that Dutch might again decide to cover his backtrail, the way he had that day at the bank. Doc got his first hole through the dentine. He swabbed the pus out carefully and started a second hole. The first puncture had relieved Dutch instantly, Doc noticed, and he hoped this would remove some of the jumpiness from the man.

Dutch brushed Doc's arm aside and pushed to his feet. "It's okay now, Doc. It's quit hurting." He was obviously eager to be going.

"No," Doc said calmly. "The teeth next to it are infected. They feel all right now, maybe but in a day or two they'll start hurting. You'll have all this to do over."

The outlaw thought a moment, then relaxed back in the chair. Doc started his drill again. He punctured two more teeth, drilling out their centers until there was scarcely anything left but a shell.

Doc noted that Danny was excited and watching with interest, while Mary looked scared but proud.

"I'll pack the holes with disinfectant," he told Dutch, "and put a cap on them. I'll guarantee they'll never bother you again."

"They better not!" the outlaw growled.

"They won't," Doc promised again. He worked carefully as he packed the big cavities with crystals, then warmed some wax and sealed the crystals in.

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Dutch climbed out of the chair and stood looking at the three of them. It was the moment Doc had dreaded. The dentist gathered himself to be ready to do what he could.

"Doc," Dutch said, "just to make sure you don't go yelling around until I'm in the clear, I'm taking the boy along."

The room swayed, and Doc saw terror leap into Mary's eyes. Danny gazed at the outlaw defiantly.

"No—no—!" Mary flung herself between Dutch and Danny.

Dutch grasped her by the front of her wrapper. "Didn't I tell you to keep quiet?"

Mary's voice was hysterical. "Take your hands off of me, you—!"

"Mary—don't—!" Doc begged, fearing she was going to scream.

Dutch was afraid of the same thing. His big fist clenched and smashed Mary full in the mouth.

Danny surged forward, then, Doc restrained him only with effort. It was enough having to restrain himself. "Wait, son!" he begged. He saw blood trickle down Mary's chin, and she staggered backward and fell into a chair.

Dutch took a grip on the collar of Danny's night-shirt and made a gesture toward the door. "Get goin, younker!"

"You don't mean to take him that way!" Doc protested. "Won't you at least let him dress?"

"I ain't taking any more chances with you people!" Dutch growled. "He's going the way he is."

DOC'S overcoat was hanging in the office. He pointed at it. "At least let him wear that." Dutch assented grudgingly. Doc got the coat and helped Danny into it. He cautiously squeezed the boy's arm, trying to squeeze all his love into it. "Careful, Danny. Do what the man says and I'm sure he'll let you go."

"If I get to the mountains without seeing anybody on my backtrail," Dutch agreed, "I'll turn him loose. If I do see somebody—well, you can guess."

"Yes," Doc agreed. "I can guess."

Mary moved as if to protest again when the outlaw hustled Danny out through the back door and into the night. Doc placed a hand over her bleeding lips. "No, Mary,"

he begged. "I know he'd shoot Danny down in cold blood, if we tried anything."

He held her trembling body against his side. He heard the hoofs of a horse moving, then there was silence. A shudder went through Doc. He felt now as he had that day long ago when he had come out of delirium to find that Emma was gone. No, it was not quite the same this time. He took a deep breath and patted Mary's shoulder.

"What are we going to do, Frank?" Mary sobbed.

"Wait, Mary," Doc answered. "Just wait."

"Wait!" the woman gasped. "Frank, he won't turn Danny loose until he's far into the mountains. Danny'd never find his way out. He might not even turn Danny loose! We've no reason to think he'd keep his word."

"On the contrary," Doc said, "we have every reason to believe he *wouldn't* keep his word. He'll do whatever serves his purpose best when the time comes. The rat breed are all like that. The only way you can deal with them is to kill them."

"Then you will arouse the marshal and get a posse started after them?" Mary asked eagerly. "Maybe he'd turn Danny loose to lighten his load if he saw he was being chased!"

"He'd lighten his load, but not by turning Danny loose. No, Mary, we've just got to wait!"

"Oh, Frank!" The woman began to cry again against his shoulder. For the first time the ghost of a smile haunted Doc's lips. It was not a pleasant smile but one of bitterness and a little repugnance. "I was aware of all those things, Mary," he resumed. "I filled all those holes I drilled with strychnine crystals, instead of disinfectant. He's packing enough of it in his mouth to kill a horse. I capped them with a thin layer of wax. That will work loose very quickly and let the saliva wash out the poison. He won't notice the taste because of the disinfectant I painted on his gums." She was clinging to him in new hope, and Doc patted her shoulder. "No, Mary, we can help Danny best by just sitting and waiting. Danny'll be home pretty soon. Dutch won't get much beyond the edge of town!"



A Promise at Robbers' Roost

By Cheyenne Taylor

His horse grew too weary to carry him. . . .

His pardner riddled by renegade bullets and he himself all but dead, Scott Davis, shotgun guard of the famed Deadwood Treasure Express, figured he owed a debt to those murderous road-miners that neither sleet, nor snow nor the fires of hell could prevent his paying.

THE sharp command to halt rang out on the crisp Autumn air just outside Robbers' Roost like the crack of a bull-popper. By reflex action John Denny, driver of the famous Treasure Coach between Deadwood and Cheyenne, leaned hard on the reins of the six horses, and let them out to make a run for it. But it was too late. Already two bandits were at the leader's heads. Others were spilling from behind boulders onto the Cheyenne Trail.

Beside Denny on the driver's seat was Scott Davis, famous chief shotgun guard of the Treasure Coach. Inside the coach, was used to haul gold from the Black Hills mines, were three soldiers also guards on

this occasion, besides two or three other passengers one of whom was the vice-president of the stage lines. Scott Davis, crouching low, opened fire on the bandits with his rifle.

"The Wall-Blackburn gang!" cried one of the soldiers, looking out a window.

With that he threw aside his rifle and made for the timber at the trail side. His two companions promptly followed his example, leaving Denny and Scott Davis to face the music. As the fight grew hotter, John Denny lost his head, leaping over the side of the coach and followed the soldiers into the timber.

Davis, a slim fellow of twenty-four,

pushed his hat to the back of his head, spat over the dash board and settled down to do some real fighting. Soon the slugs from his Henry rifle sent the highwaymen to cover. Then his gun jammed. While trying to get it going, a slug from a bandit gun bored his hip.

He rolled to the ground. Some of the robbers closed in on the stage while the rest went into the timber and searched for the soldiers, evidently fearing the arrival of reinforcements. So after taking what the passengers had on them, they departed hastily without finding the treasure they were seeking.

Denny now came out of the woods and helped to get Davis into the coach. He was feeling pretty bad at his conduct under fire. Davis could see it on his face, and, although his own pain was almost unbearable, he managed:

"Don't—take it—so hard, Johnny. Any-one would of done what you did. It shore looked like the end. . ."

"But you didn't—run." Denny couldn't look at Davis.

"Forget it! I didn't run because I didn't think I could make it. But one thing you can lay your money on—shore as hell I'll get that gang, if it's the last thing I do!" Scott Davis' face was twisted in pain, but his eyes held the chill of death.

By the time Davis recovered from his wound, it was December of 1878 and a hard winter had set in. With a squad of soldiers he set out upon the trail of the bandits. The farther they went, the tougher the going and the colder the weather.

Eventually, when the soldiers refused to continue, Davis didn't put up much argument. After all, it was his job, and he'd see it through alone.

Continuing alone, the dim trail finally disappeared altogether. During this time he had little food. His horse, struggling through the snow, soon became too worn out to carry him. The cold became intense, and biting wind seemed to penetrate to his soul. But the determination to complete his mission held him to the trail. As he lost it, he reasoned its direction and presently found proof that he had guessed correctly.

THROUGH the wild district across the Sweetwater and up through South Pass he held on doggedly. At South Pass he

reasoned that the trail, the way it was heading, would eventually lead to Green River. So he sold his horse for what he could get, and with the proceeds took passage on the Green River stage.

At Green River he spent considerable time going from one dive to another, but could find no trace of the renegades. He discussed the matter with one Charlie Atkins, and they decided Davis had passed the bandits somewhere on the way to Green River. Atkins agreed to go on the back track with Davis, and they took the stage to Alkali Springs.

A few hours after reaching Alkali Springs they located their quarry.

Wall and Blackburn were living in a cabin at the edge of town. However, they spent most of their time in a saloon. None of the rest of the gang seemed to be with them. Davis decided to wait till they were both in the cabin and tackle them early in the morning.

An hour after daylight, the bandits returned to their cabin, Davis and Atkins waited a short while, then crashed the cabin door from its hinges. A burst of flame met them, and Atkins went to the floor.

Wall, fully dressed, was firing almost point blank with both guns. But Scott Davis sidestepped and got Wall through the shoulder. He staggered and took two more slugs from Davis' guns before hitting the floor.

Blackburn had been reaching for his boots when the door crashed. Now he came charging at Davis knocking him from his feet. Blackburn went through the door and Atkins, who was just getting to his feet, took a shot at him. But the bandit escaped in the direction of Green River.

Blackburn had left his boots behind. It was bitterly cold and the snow was frozen hard, so Davis was sure he couldn't get far barefoot. He left Atkins to take care of Wall and set out after the escaping bandit.

Blackburn made good time. So good, in fact, that Davis could not understand how he could keep going over the rough trail in the bitter cold. And he didn't get the answer till he had followed Blackburn the full thirty-five miles to Green River.

Thoroughly tired out from the long pursuit, Davis entered the town of Green River slowly and cautiously. Blackburn, he knew, would be deadly.

It was late in the afternoon when Scott Davis made the rounds of the saloons in Green River. But nowhere did he find his man. Not till he reached a restaurant at the end of the town, did he come across Blackburn. On a hunch he edged through the door of the restaurant and found the bandit at a corner table gulping food.

Without hesitation Davis pulled his gun and marched up to him. "Take it easy, Blackburn!" he said. "This is the end of the trail!"

A scared look, then one of cunning and finally one of relief, came over Blackburn's face.

"All right," he said finally, laying his guns on the table. "You win."

"Stand up!" Davis ordered.

Blackburn groaned as he got to his feet. Then it was that Davis saw the man had taken off his underwear in the bitter cold and wrapped it around his feet. Even so,

he saw, they were bloody and badly swollen.

Davis took Blackburn back to Alkali Springs. From there he took his two prisoners to Cheyenne where they were tried and sentenced, Wall to eight years and Blackburn to ten years in the penitentiary.

In addition to this, Davis got information from the bandits leading to the recovery of fifteen head of valuable horses stolen from the stage company at the Lance Creek station.

This achievement of the chief shotgun guard of the Treasure Coach, ranks with the greatest exploits of lawmen of the early West. Davis followed these desperate outlaws for more than three hundred miles, much of the distance on foot, bucking intense cold, fierce winds and cutting snow. Many times he was near starvation, but with unlimited nerve and endurance he accomplished the purpose expressed when he was shot down at Robbers' Roost.



SNOW-WHITE GOLCONDA!

One desert rat discovered the riches of an unexplored Empire held not an ounce of gold!



ACROSS the sun-baked floor of Death Valley trekked Aaron Winters and Rosie, his half-Spanish wife. The prospector had been wandering the desert for many long years, and for many weary miles, in man's eternal search for wealth. The years had left him with scanty reward, but not without experience.

It was 1881 and Winters was getting along in years but the almost maddening ambition within him—his looking back on the fruitless years of toil and privation—drove him on.

So it was this day. The relentless heat of the sun, far within the reaches of the Valley, made him stop often to quench his thirst, to gaze and inspect with familiar and wizened eyes at the minerals that lay around the parched desert bed. Suddenly, his eyes gleamed at an outcropping.

He picked it up, trembling, examining it closely as he held it in his horny hands. Then, with the chemical he carried to recognize borax, he fired it. He watched it burn, green.

"Rosie! Rosie!" He shouted. "It's borax! We'll be rich!" All the hope, the longing and dreams of Aaron Winters had come true.

This was the strike—like the few others that helped build the West—that prospectors

search in vain for. Winters and his wife sold their claim to W. T. Coleman of San Francisco, and in the few remaining years left to them, lived in the ease which had previously been denied them.

As the years went on, the twenty mule teams that hauled the borax from the mines in Death Valley, across more than 160 miles of desert, to the railroad, opened up a new saga of the Old West.

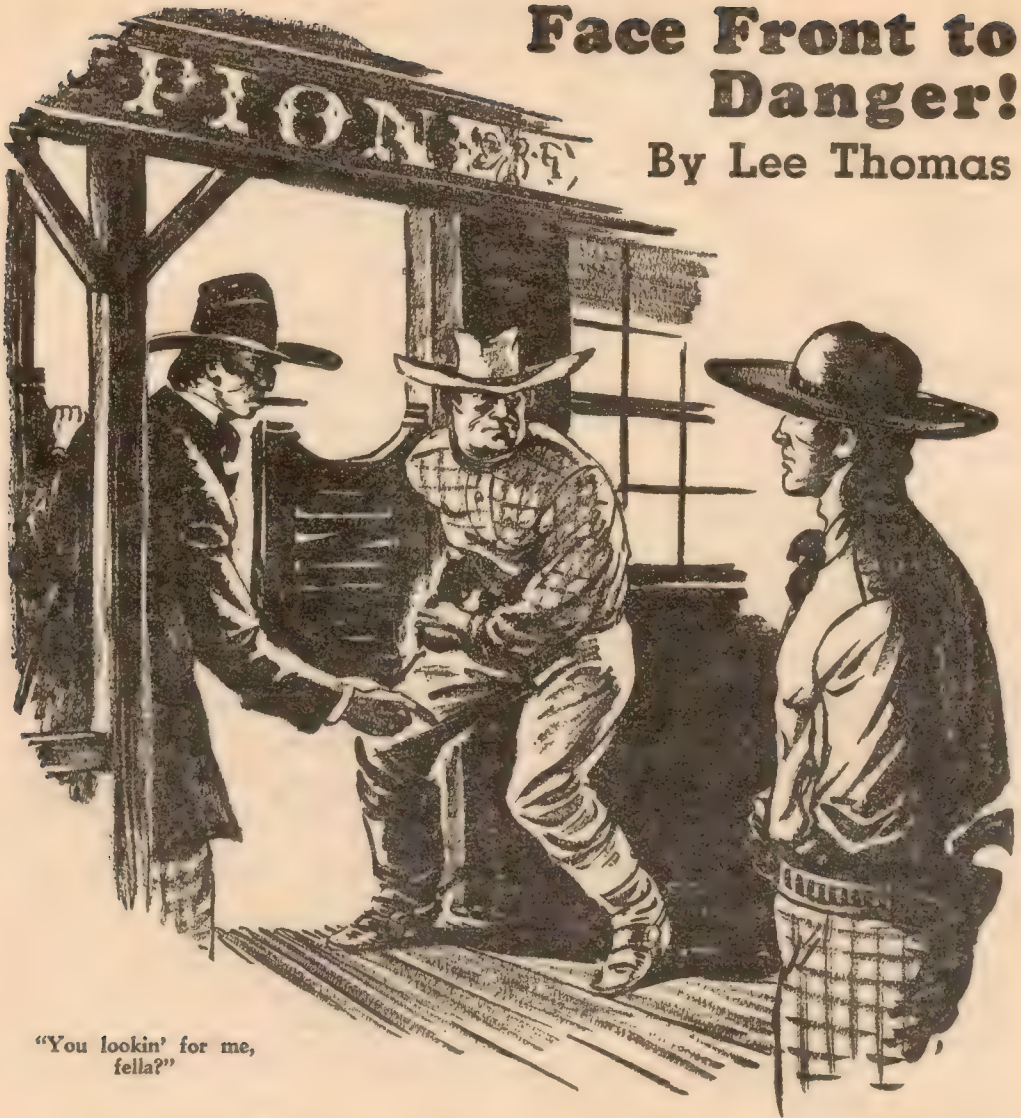
Always the search for new and richer ore deposits, development of more efficient means of transportation, better methods of refining, caused the Pacific Coast Borax Company to move out of Death Valley to Borate, California, where deposits of borate of lime were discovered which were easier worked in ledge formations than on the surface. This was in the Calico Mountains, where the twenty mule teams yielded to the locomotive for hauling the borate ore to the calcining plant.

When Aaron Winters discovered borax in Death Valley, he was long past the age when most prospectors have gone to their reward. But he made a multi-million dollar industry in the desert possible. He was, in a measure, founder of an empire. . . .

—George Jones

Face Front to Danger!

By Lee Thomas



"You lookin' for me, fella?"

A broken shell of a man after Rebel bullets had crippled him, Bill Holmes, ex-lawman, learned that only by sustaining another, greater wound could he start to fight his way back to manhood. . . .

HE WAS doing the trick with the cartridge when his wife came into the room. He had a .45 shell laying across the back of his fingers, and his right hand was on the table. She stood there, holding her bag of groceries, she felt that sense of loss again, that feeling of loneliness. But she stood there and watched. He paid her no attention; he was concen-

trating on the trick.

He balanced the cartridge carefully on the back of his fingers. The catch was to snap up suddenly with the little finger and send the cartridge into the air. To do that, his little finger had to act suddenly, and possess strength. Everything was in place, and he was ready. She held her breath, and hoped.

He snapped his little finger then. But it wasn't a snap—it was just a slow movement—and the cartridge, instead of leaping, only rolled off his hand and onto the table. He picked it up clumsily, conscious of the cold sweat that beaded his forehead.

He said, "I guess it's no dice, June."

"It'll come back," she said. She tried to sound cheerful, but he knew the cold doubt that she felt. He got to his feet, again rolling the cartridge between his fingers. They were still stiff, uncertain. He seldom went downtown any more, he asked, "Any news?"

She said, quietly, "Ed Handgren came to town this morning. He was in front of the saloon, drunk as usual. Mike Jones was with him. I had to pass right beside them. Handgren asked about you—how you were getting along, and if you could yet use your right hand."

"I'm going to—" He halted suddenly—he had almost said *kill him*. But you can't shoot a man when you can't handle a gun and when you haven't got any guts inside of you. He said, "Was that all?"

She spoke slowly. "No, Handgren says he is going to kill Joe Young. I was over to their place, Mrs. Young wants Joe to leave, but he won't—he's stubborn. This town needs a marshal, Bill."

"Yes," he agreed. He added, "I guess it does—"

She was silent for a moment and her face was grave. He studied it and, because he knew her so well, he read many things there: uncertainty and a touch of disgrace. He thought, If I hadn't lost my guts she would still have admired me despite my arm, but I lost my nerve and it hurts her. He reached over with his right hand, and put his empty left sleeve inside his shirt pocket, pushing it down hard.

"I'll get my hand back in action," he said. "Then I'll pin on that star again."

She said, "No, Bill, you'll never wear a star again, unless—" She stopped there, she had almost said *unless you get your courage back*; but you can't say that to a man, you can't crucify him with words. She turned and went into the kitchen.

His face was bleak as he watched her go and, when she was gone, he returned to the table. He laid his hand down again, working the shell into place over the fingers. He balanced the heavy cartridge into position.

Then his right finger came up, quicker now, and the shell lifted and landed on the table.

He tried it again.

HE HAD been a sniper in the war; he had been with Hickock. They had been together a year, each making his mark. Hickock had made the bigger mark when he had gotten over fifty rebels in one day. They went apart after that—company orders. Then came the day he'd never forget—he had walked into that enemy nest along the Mississippi. He had had a reputation by this time and it had gone ahead, the rebs awaited him and built the ambush.

They had shot him down, and they had done a good job. His company had come up, in time; it had driven them back, but he woke up in a hospital. He remembered it: he had been screaming, and as he regained consciousness, he became aware of his screams.

He'd tried to raise his right hand and the fingers were stiff; he tried to move the left, but there was nothing there to move. He lay there filled with pain, and one of his arms was gone and the other strapped to a board, and he didn't know how he got there. . . . Then there was nothing, and when he woke up, his left arm was gone, and he only owned—but could not use—the right.

But now his will, his fight, were gone; he had lost that when guns had talked, and the blackness had held him. Some people had pity for him, though they held it behind their lips; others were glad and happy underneath, and Handgren was one of these.

For he had met Handgren before, had shot him and had forced him to leave town. That had been before he had walked into the Rebel's lead, when he had had his arm and his speed of movement, his courage.

He had not killed Handgren because he thought the man had learned his lesson, but now Handgren was back, and he was out to kill Joe Young.

There was a knock at the front door, June answered it. He stood with his back to his desk when June and the man entered. He was a thin man, almost too thin, and he spoke in a near whisper, "I want to talk to you, Bill."

June returned to the kitchen.

"Handgren is in town, Bill. He's come

to kill me. A man named Mike Jones is with him. There's two against me. . . . What'll I do, Bill?"

"There's two things you can do, Joe. One is to move out of town until Handgren and Jones leave. That is the logical step. The other is to get a gun and go against them. But they'll kill you."

"I can't run," Young replied. "I've got my wife and the two boys."

"You can send for them."

"Hattie's a proud woman, Bill."

"She'll follow you," he said. "She's stuck to you so far, even when you almost went to the pen."

"I was fighting then," said Joe Young. "I was fighting for my freedom. But I won't be fighting if I run, and Hattie hates a coward. I made my error five years ago when I hooked up with Handgren and made things easy from the inside when he robbed the bank. But Handgren double-crossed me. Then for the first time I saw how rotten and low I had been to work with him, and turned state's evidence. I fought a battle with myself that day on the witness stand. I kept on at the bank with my job and established myself again. But if I run now—"

"You'll die if you don't."

Young's voice was low. "Maybe, Bill," he said, "it's better to die for your principles—to have that much guts—than it is to keep on living, knowing that you've double-crossed yourself. Handgren's given me until five o'clock to pull out. I guess when that time comes I'll get hold of a gun."

"You're a fool, Joe."

Joe Young said, "You only die once," and turned and walked out.

Bill watched Young go, and he felt a pity; but mixed with this was admiration, and the admiration was the stronger. He was thinking of that when June came back.

He remembered her as she had been ten years before, when he had told her she should not marry him, for he was of a drifting heart, and her life would not be secure. But she had fallen into his way of living and he knew she enjoyed it. Yet her eyes held no happiness now.

She said, "Handgren and Jones will kill him, Bill."

"I know that," he said. He spread his hand out flatly on the table and looked at his fingers. I got only five of them now,

he thought, once I had ten, I was respected then, and I had my self-respect. He judged those two elements, and decided that self respect was greater than the respect of your neighbors.

He said, almost angrily, "What if they do? He won't run. He places his pride before his safety."

"He's your friend," she said. "He came to you for help."

"I know that. But he's afraid."

"No," she said, "He's not afraid. He knew you had gone through this many times, and he wanted your advice. But you turned him away and you did it sharply—I couldn't help hearing. He'll go out there, now, he doesn't know much about guns. They'll be sure to kill him, but he isn't a coward, Bill."

She stood there looking at him, her eyes made him wonder what she was thinking. He felt the dull tick of the clock and he finally asked, "Well?"

"I'm leaving you, Bill."

He was silent.

"Sonny and Mildred will be out of school soon," she said. "I'm taking them and going over to Mrs. Young's. We'll stay there the two weeks until their school term is out, and then I'm going home to my parents in Wyoming. I can't stand this any longer, Bill."

"You can't stand what?" He knew, but he wanted to hear her say it.

"I can't stay here and see you disintegrate. I love you, Bill, as much as ever—you're the father of my two children. But when they got bigger they'd see it, and they'd lose their respect, like I've lost mine. No woman will love a man she cannot respect. Soon my love will turn; it has to. I have to save our children from that. If they leave you now—they'll never know."

"June," he spoke her name as if it was for the last time.

SHE answered, "I've thought this over for awhile, Bill. I don't want to leave, but I have to. You lost something back there—and you're making no effort to regain it."

She left, and he heard her moving about upstairs, here in the house he had built for her.

The voice inside, cold and objective, said, *Are you going to let her go?* He

knew that she would never stay so long as he was the way he was, and he could never hold her unless he changed.

She came to the door and said, "Your fingers are well, and you know it. I've seen you work that shell trick before, when you thought I wasn't looking, and you were fast then."

"That isn't true," he said.

She picked up her bag, and the door closed gently behind her, as though she were shutting off a part of her life, and she was shutting it off gently because that act brought her great pain.

Then silence held the house.

He sat at his desk, thinking that maybe there was something beyond the call of man, and maybe some unseen Force held this strength, and he wants you to fight to get it back. Then he summed it up to one thing, and that was *fear*. He was afraid, and he knew it; he had lied to himself, and that hurt him—deeply.

He pulled open the desk drawer. The gun lay there, the belts coiled against the bottom of the drawer. He picked them up and laid them on the desk. He smiled then and put one gun back.

HE STRAPPED the belt around him, the gun on his right thigh. He had not put the belt on since he had left the hospital, and its weight was heavy. Then a sudden thought hit him, he took the other gun and put in under his belt, hiding it beneath his shirt. He opened the door and went outside.

He looked at his watch; it was fifteen to five, and went out, down the alley. Joe Young came from his backyard, and said, "What are you doing here, Bill?"

He looked at the guns on Joe Young's hips. They were out of place. He said, "I could ask you the same."

"I'm going to kill Ed Handgren."

"I'll go with you," said Bill. They went quietly down the alley, and he paced his steps so Joe Young walked ahead and when the man was far enough—a pace or so—he drew the .45. The heavy gun rose and came down behind Young's ear, Young went down. Bill said to himself, That was easy—

He left Joe there and moved out on the street. The dust dragged along his boots.

Hank, an oldster, was standing on the street. He called to him: "Hank, run and tell Handgren and Mike Jones I am coming after them."

"They're in the Pioneer," replied the old man. Then he glanced up and shook his head, muttering to himself.

Bill's tone held strength. "Go tell them," he said.

The old man was off, and he watched him go. He suddenly felt free, and his breath came evenly. He stood there and felt his new freedom, knowing that the old fear was behind.

Then the two came out of the Pioneer. . . .

Handgren was tall and bony, beside him was Jones, who had a reputation as a killer. Handgren spoke first, "You lookin' for me, fella?"

Bill said, "I am."

"But why? You ain't no marshal now."

"That's no hell of a difference," said Bill. He said, "You threatened my friend Joe Young. I'm taking up his fight."

He knew what was in Handgren's mind, for the man was looking at his right hand. And he let that hand hook in his gunbelt, over the buckle. Handgren did not know about the hidden gun. Handgren wanted to kill him, his eyes and his voice showed it. He then nodded and blurted out, "Get him, Mike!"

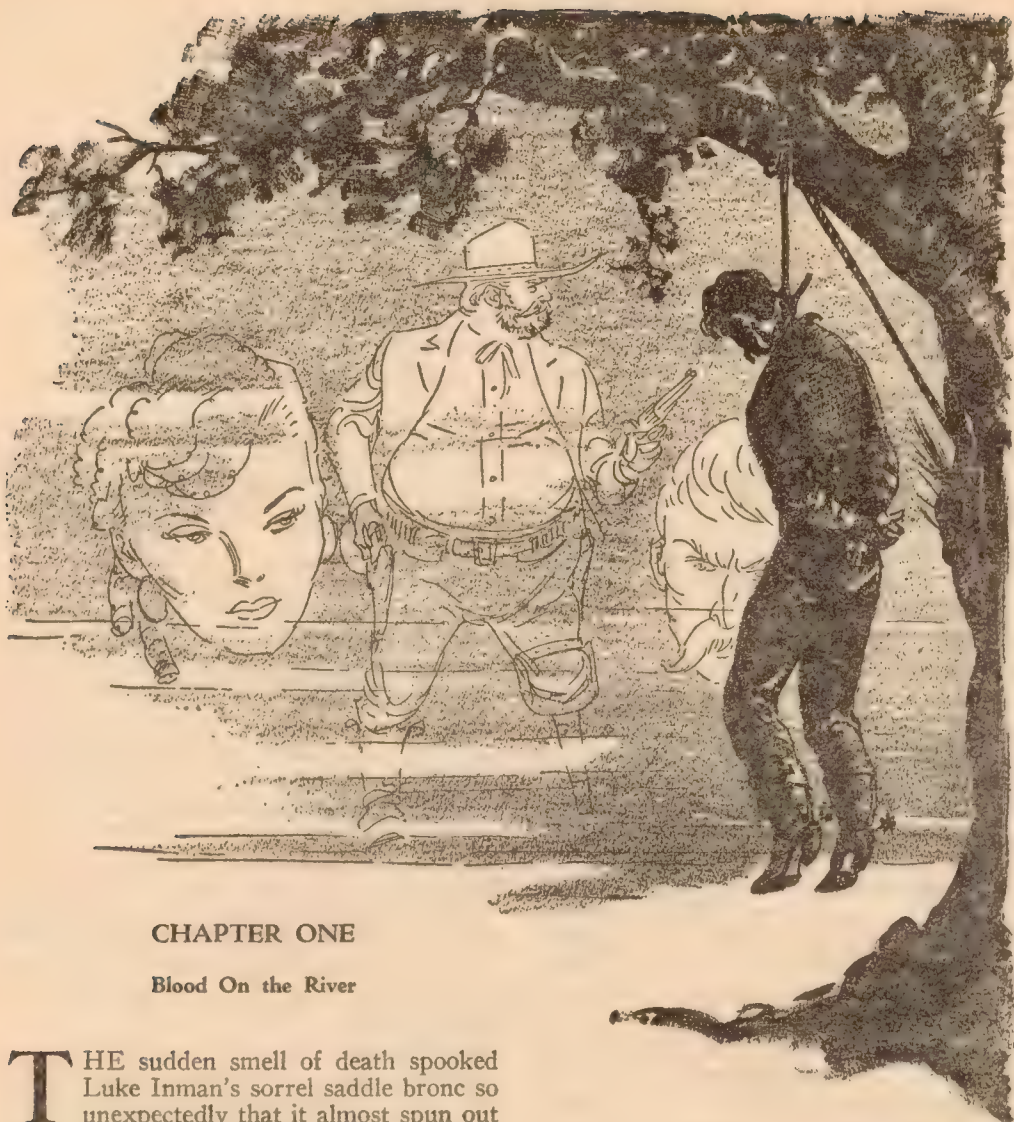
Jones' gun came up, and Bill shot him. Bill stood there and anchored himself to the ground as Jones went down. Handgren saw the hidden gun, then, and Bill saw anger flush through him. And he knew, too, that Handgren had him.

The bullet hit Bill in the ribs and knocked him back. He felt the pain but there was no terror with it. He steadied himself and shot, and Handgren took the bullet. His gun kicked back and two other shots took Handgren. He went down.

Bill stood there and blew the smoke from his gun. He looked at his hands so strangely steady now, and his smile was twisted. Then he lifted his eyes; there was June, and she was coming toward him.

"Well," he said, simply, "the old man has come home. What have you got for him?"

She said nothing as her arms went around him. But he read the answer he wanted in her eyes. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Blood On the River

THE sudden smell of death spooked Luke Inman's sorrel saddle bronc so unexpectedly that it almost spun out from under him. Luke found himself grabbing at everything handy, to keep from parting company with his hull as the stampeding bronc scrambled back up the steep slope away from the ford.

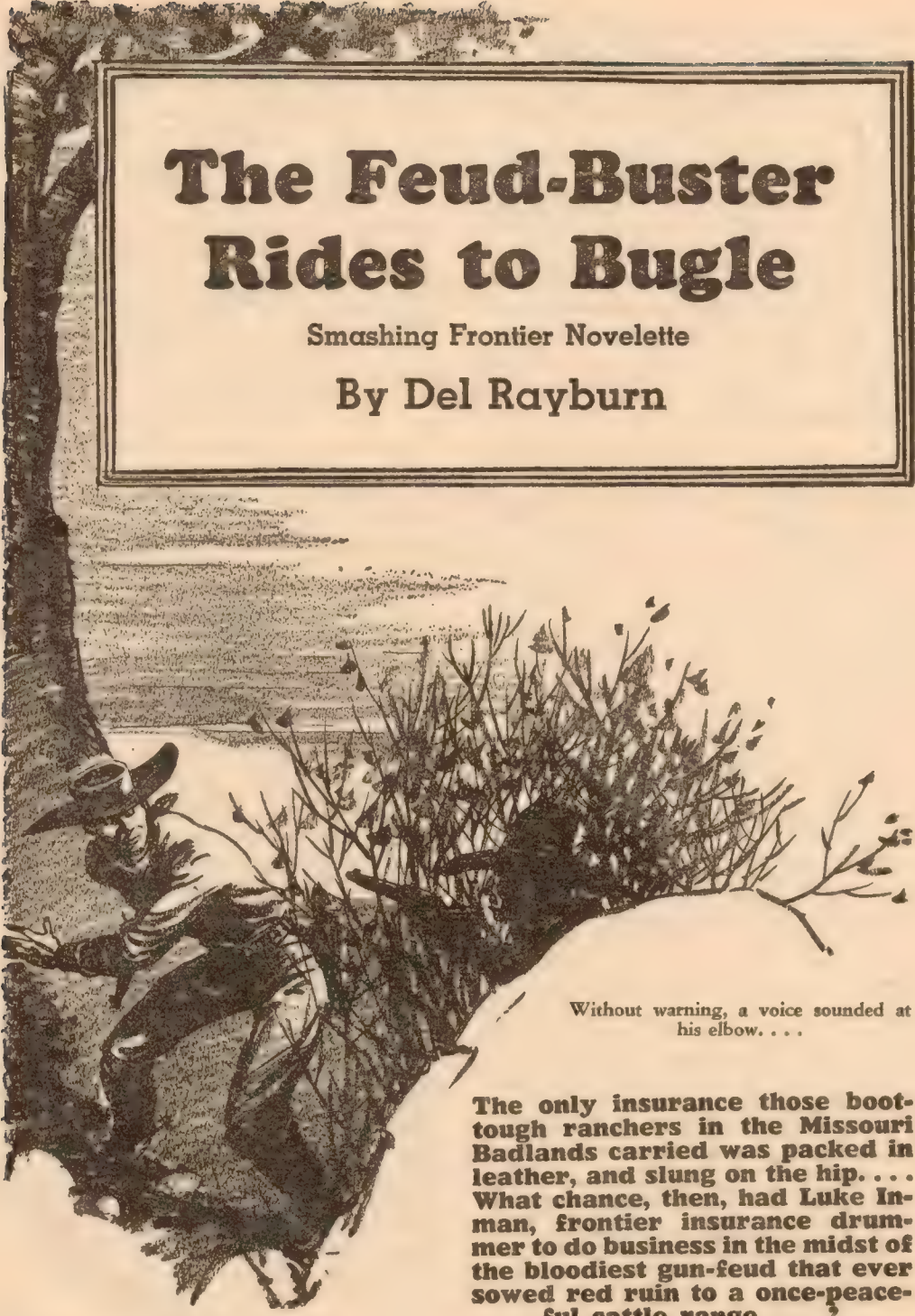
The heavy shadows of late evening lay over the Montana range country. And under the cottonwoods that towered up above the sandy loam down close to the Missouri, the shadows were so black that, for the first moments, a man riding into them could see nothing.

The air lay flat and unmoving under the evening calm, so that the terrifying scent did not reach the bronc's nostrils until

he was almost upon its source. As it was, Luke's eyes, just adapting themselves to the pall-like gloom, caught a blurred glimpse of the thing that hung listlessly from a cottonwood limb overhanging the trail, only a few feet from the river's brink.

"Mighty public places folks in this country pick for their hangings!" Luke growled, reefing hard on one rein, pulling his stampeding bronc's head back so far to one side that he had to run in a circle, until enough of his alarm wore off so that he could be handled.

Luke's old bed-horse came trotting up,



The Feud-Buster Rides to Bugle

Smashing Frontier Novelette

By Del Rayburn

Without warning, a voice sounded at
his elbow. . . .

The only insurance those boot-tough ranchers in the Missouri Badlands carried was packed in leather, and slung on the hip. . . . What chance, then, had Luke Inman, frontier insurance drummer to do business in the midst of the bloodiest gun-feud that ever sowed red ruin to a once-peaceful cattle range . . . ?

nickering anxiously at the young bronc's strange behavior. Following behind, the second horse had failed to reach the fearful scent.

Perhaps sight of the old mare dissolved a little of the young saddle bronc's terror. But his flared nostrils were quivering, his braced legs trembling as Inman stepped out of the saddle.

Time and soothing talk wore away more of the sorrel's fear, to some extent. But when Luke mounted again and tried to rein back toward the river, no amount of coaxing was going to get that bronc back to that death-ridden ford.

Grumbling, Luke again dismounted. He made his reins fast to a rope of the diamond hitch binding his bed-pack. He snapped a length of drag rope onto the halter ring of the bed horse and left her ground hitched.

"I'm not going to ride a hundred miles outa my way to find another ford," he muttered, starting to high-heel his way back to the break that led sharply down into the narrow timbered bottom around the ford.

He slipped and slid down the abrupt pitch of the narrow break in the upland wall bounding the river. Then he was once more in the black shadows of the narrow, timbered bottom, his hoofbeats muffled in the yielding sand.

The dead man had evidently been hanged from the height of a horse's back, jerked out of the saddle, for he hung so high in the air that, afoot, Luke could not reach the rope.

A SHORT search, through the eerie, pall-like gloom, turned up a stout willow pole. Luke was binding his bowie fast to its end, when with no warning a cold voice sounded, it seemed, almost at his elbow.

"You a friend of the feller walking the air up yonder, stranger?"

Luke didn't turn, for he sensed that a ready gun was likely centered square on his spine. He held his voice to a low drawl.

"If I was his friend, I'd have gotten here a heap sooner, or not at all. A friend's mighty useless to a man after his neck's already stretched."

"You better read the sign the light-footed feller's wearing, then, and make tracks yonderly," the cold voice advised.

Luke let the pole and knife drop at his feet. He was going to need plenty of luck as well as free hands for what was coming. He took a few steps that brought him nearer the hanged man.

"Bugle's on across the river a little piece, ain't it?" he asked suddenly as he stopped moving.

"Yep," the voice assented. "And strangers and association men ain't even a little welcome. The feather-footed feller was aimin' to join up with the association."

"Never heard of the association, just going to do a little business in Bugle." While speaking Luke did some rapid thinking.

In a fast-moving spin, he faded to one side, his gun coming out. Hot lead screamed through the space he had just vacated. And then his own gun bucked in his hand. Here it was a pure case of kill or be killed, and Luke didn't aim to die young. He tagged his target with his second bullet. A scream drowned out in a thick gurgle as the man thudded to the ground.

"A hell of a note," he grumbled. "Come north to make my fortune selling life insurance, and start right off by killing another man!"

GETTING across the Missouri necessitated shifting the bed pack from the old horse to the sorrel, as well as a blindfold and no little cunning. But when Luke Inman hit the north bank of the Big Muddy that night, he brought his whole outfit with him; the sorrel on a lead rope, two dead men roped on top the bed roll.

A few minutes later Luke reined into the rutted street of the little renegade town that lead between two rows of ramshackle buildings. Saloons were going full blast. Before each of them a small pool or two of yellow light poured out into the blackness of the street through smoke dimmed windows. Even if Luke had not long before become familiar with Bugle's reputation, he would have known from the looks of the bronc's lining those hitchcracks that he was up against the kind of citizens who had cut its teeth on old boot heels and cartridge lead. Any man, he reflected, if he is to handle a smart horse, must be a little smarter; or if it's a tough-hided, hell-raising bronc, the rider must be a great deal more ornery.

Luke reined up before the livery barn. A white-haired oldster was sprawled upon a knife-scarred chair tilted against the side of the door. His tobacco-stained, handle-bar mustache stirred uneasily with the suction of each snore. On the ground beside him, was a burlap wrapped gallon jug.

"I guess I'll leave the boys here to keep you company, old-timer," Luke decided. He stepped down and unlashed the bodies, arranging them in a sitting position just inside the door, their heads against the oldster's lap. He put the whiskey jug between them.

Luke grinned, surveying his arrangement. It was only then that his eye fell upon the crudely lettered sign, worn by the hanged man:

WARNING!

This is the way we handle Association reps. Keep your cows and your men away from these breaks if you want to see them again. Strangers ain't wanted. Ride on some other way if you aim to keep alive.

AWRY smile masked Luke Inman's face as he removed the warning from the dead man and attached it to the drunken livery keeper. But he moved more quickly now. When the sign was displayed upon the oldster's bosom to his satisfaction, Luke stepped into his saddle and reined back into the night.

Behind a store on the far side of the street he switched horses again, putting the pack back on the old horse and his saddle on the sorrel. He then left them and headed for the nearest saloon.

Luke moved like a prowling tom cat now, hugging the shadows and, his spurs left on his saddle, moving almost noiselessly. He didn't hanker to be discovered here until he was ready for it.

Rumor had it that a rebel ex-cavalry officer, who had done his riding since the war with a peg leg stuck into a stirrup boot, had brought a herd up from Texas and stayed to found this tough little badlands town.

Luke expected to recognize Cap Southern, because a fiery-bearded big one-legged man answering the same description had laid over awhile to rest his herd not far from Dodge City, several years before. Luke had been a deputy town-marshal in Dodge at the time, and had drawn the assignment of riding out to that camp and

making the boys acquainted with Dodge rules.

He was only a few feet from the saloon door when above the uproar he heard a shrill scream of terror. He dove back around the corner of the building just as the batwings crashed open and men poured out.

"It's Granddad Coy, ain't it?" someone asked.

The sound of living terror was rapidly drawing nearer, as if torn from the throat of a man running for his life.

"Likely seeing snakes again," someone else said.

"Serves him right fer drinkin' his own brew," another hoarse voice growled.

There was a faint streak of gray flashing in the middle of the street, the scream of fear traveling with it. And then an inspiration struck some young tough puncher in the crowd.

"Let's rope him before he quits the country!"

There was the sound of scrambling boot heels and plunging horses. Then hoof-beats thundered, and a minute later the ropers trotted back to the hitchrack. Behind them, dragging through the dust on the end of a rope, was the oldster Luke had left sleeping peacefully at the livery. As several men left the crowd and went to help him up, the man shook himself into some semblance of sobriety.

"Two dead men!" he gasped. "T-two dead men, drinking whiskey with me down at the barn! Two dead men passing my jug between them . . . !"

"Crazier'n a hoot owl!" a tough-hand said. "Rap him across the horns and let him sleep it off without bothering the rest of us."

"I'll take care of him; leave him be!" an authoritative voice cut in. The crowds from the other saloons had arrived to see what the excitement was about. Luke slipped in among the milling men. He caught sight of the last speaker, and was surprised at the display of sympathy from such a tough-appearing gunman, so black browed and burly. "Come on, Grand-dad," the fellow soothed, taking the oldster's arm. "I'll go down to the barn with you and chase off whatever scared yuh."

"What's the ruckus, cowhands?" inquired a rumbling bellow. Luke's head

swiveled to the saloon door. And though he could see only a hulking outline against the light inside, a half-smile touched his lips. For Cap Southern's figure was unmistakable.

"Old man Coy's seeing things again," someone answered.

"Come on in and have a few more shots of this Injun whiskey and you'll be seeing things too," the towering peg-legged man in the doorway rumbled a laugh. And the crowd surged toward the doorway as the big man stepped back inside.

Luke went along with them. He elbowed his way to a place at the bar right beside Southern.

"Everyone have one last drink on me," the leader of the badland crowd was inviting. "Then the bars are locking up so the lot of you can get busy and do something to earn a few drinks."

He had swung around to face the crowd, and as he turned back to the bar his eyes fell upon Luke Inman. Instantly suspicion came alive in the probing pupils. He studied the stranger a long moment, then he declared, in a tone too low for anyone else to hear:

"I don't seem to know you, hombre. How long have you been around?"

"Not very long," Luke answered with a slow, steady grin. "But you sure should remember me, Cap—if you remember Dodge City."

CHAPTER TWO

Dividends On Death

FIRE SUDDENLY blazed in Southern's probing eyes. His bearded mouth jerked open. And now his tone was not guarded.

"That spur-jingling lawman! Run my Texas crew back to camp like a pack of tail-tucking dogs after they'd rode in to shoot up the town. A damnyankee startoter!" One big paw streaked for his gun, but Luke Inman's hand was already filled.

"Take it easy, Pappy," he soothed, shoving his gun muzzle up against Southern's hard paunch. "Keep your boys off my back, or I'll blast your belt buckle through you."

"Why, damn you!" the peg-legged giant roared. "Coming in here with your badge pinned to your undershirt so I wouldn't spot you! There ain't nothing lower!"

"Might be," Luke nodded calmly. "But it so happens that I don't pack a badge of no kind. If I blast you, you'll stay blasted. So keep your dogs off me."

"Put up your irons, boys," the peg-leg growled. "You don't need 'em yet. This thing's got no chance getting clear of us." Then his angry eyes came back to Luke. "What's this about you not being a badge toter?"

"That the way it lays," Luke declared. "I got tired of folks thinking gunsmoke when they spoke my name. There ain't no future to being a gun-fighter, so I quit. I'm in business on my own now. I come up all the way from Santa Fe to make a dicker with you."

"What you got to sell?" Southern demanded. "An' what in blue blazes makes you think I'd want any?"

"I'm selling life insurance," Luke replied calmly. "Not being much of a salesman, I'd starve where gents with a real gift of gab operate. So, I'm making this humanitarian service available to you uninformed rough-necks, that wouldn't have a chance at it otherwise." He prodded Southern's paunch with the gun-barrel again.

A FLICKER of interest caught and tried to grow in the big badlander's hard eyes. But he tried to belie it in his next words. "I've always wore all the life insurance I ever needed in my holster. I don't need no other. What good will it do me?"

"What good's that insurance in your holster doing you now?" Luke pointed out with another gentle nudge of his gun muzzle. "What if I was some gent that hated your guts? You got any kin?"

Southern nodded. "The prettiest and the stubbornnest gal in Montana."

"You leaving anything to take care of her, if something happened to you?"

"Merle don't need no caring for," Southern snorted. "She's got more fight and nerve than any man I've got. Likely, from outside somewhere, she's got a carbine lined on your backbone right now."

"She wouldn't be handicapped none would she," Luke persisted, "by a good solid stake of cold cash, in case you cashed your chips?"

"How's any badlander got any chance of leaving any kind of a stake with that

high and mighty Plains Cowmen Pool, across the river, hogging all the good graze?" Southern scoffed.

"Insurance'll do it," Luke declared. "It works like this: You bet against yourself; lay your money that you won't live another year. My company will cover your bet and give you long odds that you do. If you're still alive at the end of the year, you've lost your bet, but you don't mind losing it because you're still alive. So you put up your money again. Whenever you don't live out the year, the jackpot goes to your gal. You lay one hundred dollars, and she gets ten thousand, if you cash in before the year's out."

"I don't want none!" the grizzled badlander declared. "That damned Hawk Jamison's wolf-whelp, Bronc, would bush-whack me sure, figuring he'd get both my gal and that pile of cash. Jamison and his Prairie Pool may get me—but they ain't going to make no money doing it!"

Too late Luke sensed the little gleam of triumph that flamed in Southern's eyes with his last words. He caught a flash of movement from the tail of his eye as someone moved in behind him. He started to spin, but a shattering blow caught him along the temple.

As he went down in a twisting plunge, he caught a glimpse of the contorted features of the black browed gun-tough who had taken the drunken livery keeper back to his barn. And in his last moments of consciousness, he heard the renegade say:

"That jigger had you in a tight didn't he Cap?" he demanded, seeking praise. "I found Cherokee Smith down at the barn with a hole blown through him, along with Jamison's Association man that me and the boys strung up tonight. Likely this thing plugged Cherokee getting across the river."

"Throw him down the cellar where he won't wander off," Luke heard Southern order. "Maybe we'll hang him when you get back in the morning. Down your drinks and mount up. Scatter that Association beef gather till hell won't have it. We'll learn them. . . . Then Luke heard no more. . . .

SOMEONE was shaking him then. Trip-hammers thundered in his head, his body one gigantic ache.

Luke blinked open his eyes and saw,

leaning over him, the delicate features of a girl, shadowed becomingly by soft lantern light.

"Blackie bruised up your skull a little, didn't he?" the girl said softly. "He's a mean devil!"

"I sure won't argue the point with you," Luke grinned wryly. "Who in the world are you, anyhow?"

"Merle Southern. And I need your help."

"I'd sure be glad to oblige, lady, but am I in any position to help you?" Luke asked. "I sort of got the idea, as I was being put to sleep, that I was going to wake up a prisoner."

"Don't worry about that," the girl assured him. "I mean to turn you loose, whether you help me or not, but—"

"Well in that case, I'm your huckleberry," he declared. "If you want to trust me."

"Any gun-fighter who had brains enough to quit his guns for something where fighting ability doesn't completely own him," the girl declared with feeling, "for my money is a man I'd be proud to trust . . . Do you know how to stop a dog fight?"

"Sure," Luke grinned. "Get both groups thinking about something else, so they forget about fighting."

"The Association bunch—the outfits dad calls the Prairie Pool—were laying for our Badlanders across the river tonight. Some traitor must have tipped them off. They'll wipe out most of the men from this side, come morning," Merle Southern declared anxiously.

"I reckon one gunfighter, more or less, wouldn't make much difference," Luke mused. "I'll be darned if I have any idea what I could do."

"Something's got to be done!" Merle exclaimed. "This whole affair is a trumped-up deal anyhow. Dad or none of the others can see it, but it is. The badlanders and the plains outfits used to get along all right. Then someone started stirring up trouble, under cover, on both sides. Now they're about ready to start a real range war. If they do, neither side will have anything left when it's over."

"Getting their minds off of how much they hate the other side," Luke pointed out, "would take a heap of doing, now that they're out to kill each other."

"This insurance of yours," the girl suggested, "can't you put some limitations on the pay-off? What if the man insured has to die in bed of a natural cause, or the fellow named as his heir doesn't get the money?"

"I reckon I could write something like that in, but what good would it do?" Luke asked. Then his own mind supplied the answer immediately, for the light of inspiration flashed up in his eyes almost before he had finished the question. "If I wrote in such a clause, and sold them insurance on each *other*—" he paused to see if Merle followed his thought.

"—they'd be afraid to shoot at the others for fear the man whose life was insured in their favor would get killed. Then they'd lose ten thousand dollars," she finished eagerly. "It might work!"

"Yes, but how am I going to go about selling the insurance to them when they're already out there fighting. Besides, I don't know anyone on the plains outfits' side."

"I can take you to see Bronc Jamison," Merle announced. And from the rather breathless way she spoke the name, Luke decided the contact between the two youngsters was more than a passing acquaintance. "He wants to avoid trouble as badly as I do."

Luke frowned, getting up from the cellar floor. "Talking those men into buying insurance when they're thinking about fighting. . . . Well, I dunno. And even if I could, they'd likely lynch me when they found out I'd double-crossed them and insured an enemy—"

"It'll work!" the girl said enthusiastically. "First, sell all of it to dad, insuring the lives of the Plainsmen and in favor of our badlanders. Then I'll take you to Bronc, and he'll help you tame Old Man Jamison."

"I'm still thinking it'll take some tall doing," Luke declared. "But let's go get the papers."

CAP SOUTHERN presented a wild spectacle as he sprang upright in bed, a gun in one big paw, in answer to Merle's light touch on his burly shoulder. For a moment his eyes were alarmed, then they became angry as he recognized Luke before him.

"What's *he* doing here?" the old bad-

lander demanded. "I thought he was locked in the cellar!"

"Dad, he's here to help you," Merle soothed. "Some one had tipped off the Plains outfit about the raid tonight. They've got the boys sewed up in Howling Dog Draw. He's going to sell you insurance on your ten top men, so that if you lose them at least you'll have money to—"

"I don't want none of his damned insurances!" Southern roared. "What's he doing running around loose, anyhow? If he killed Cherokee Smith I'm going to hang him. Now get outa here so I can get my pants on and go get them young sheep-headed fools outa the trap they blundered into."

"Dad—"

"Shut up!" the old Badlander roared. "When did I start taking back-talk from a woman? Get outa here!"

His gun centered on Luke. "You stand fast, hombre! I'm going to lock you up this time where you'll stay put. Shuck out your gun and stand yonder!"

Luke appeared not to hear Southern, and merely stood before him unmoving, calmly returning his stare.

"I said shuck out that gun!" the badlander repeated. "Or do I have to blow you loose from it?"

"Go to hell," Luke replied evenly. "If you're low enough to shoot a man that's made no move to harm you, you're too damn' low for me to bother with."

With an angry grunt, Southern shoved his stump into the harness of his wooden leg and stood up in his red-flannel underwear.

"By granny, I'll take it away from you then," he rumbled, advancing upon Luke, still holding his gun ready. He was dangerous, because he figured his authority had been outraged.

Luke waited until Southern was only a pace away, and already reaching for his gun. Then when he moved, it was with the same eye-defying suddenness that had once made his draw famous.

One hand shoved the oldster's gun out of line and in the same instant Luke kicked his wooden leg out from under him and rammed him under the chin with his head. The angry oldster spun back off-balance and fell with a crash that shook the house.

The bedroom door burst open and Merle

flashed in, just as Cap righted himself. For the moment he ignored Luke entirely.

"You danged worthless, ungrateful, double-crossing, mule-headed, cold-blooded female!" he bellowed. "Turn loose a killer lawdog on your poor old father. See what he done to me! Get outa here! I ain't got no cloths on."

"You're squawling like a spoiled brat," Merle grinned, relief on her face as she saw nothing serious had happened. "If you're bound to act like a ruffian, don't beller if someone else handles you like one. I wish he'd knocked both your horns off. You're not half as tough as you try to make out."

"Is that so!" the outraged oldster roared. But the girl was gone, tripping back out the door and closing it behind her.

LUKE had drawn his gun when the oldster glanced around to glare at him. The situation was reversed now, for Southern's gun was on the floor. Contemptuously he picked it up and tossed it onto his bed, and then crawled to where his wooden leg had landed.

"I wouldn't buy nothing from you if you owned all the Devil's water-rights and I was settin' roostin' on Hell's back-log!" he rumbled.

"I didn't want to sell you anything anyhow," Luke replied unperturbed. "I only came because your daughter asked me. Do you think I care whether your men are instred or not, after the way you've shoved me around?"

Cap Southern had gotten his wooden leg back in place and climbed back erect. He was in the act of reaching his pants when Luke murmured, while turning as if to leave:

"I'll go to Wing Jamison, a man that's showed he has some gumption. He's smart enough to jump at a chance to insure his men. Even if you do get your crew out of his trap, if you kill any one of his boys the ten thousand he'll get will bring in a small army of real gunmen. He'll know a real proposition when he hears it."

"Wait a minute, you penny ante thing!" Southern bellowed, jerking on his pants. "So you're sore because you got roughed up a little. I see your little game. You'd like to get that Association outfit insured so every time we kill one of 'em, they can

hire ten more to take his place. They can buy all they want, but you don't want to sell us none. You tried to make me mad so I'd play the fool and not want to buy from you. Mighty smooth ain't yuh? But you ain't getting past ol' Cap Southern."

The oldster made a dive for his gun and whirled back with it cocked and ready.

"You pull up to the table, yonder, and get to work on them contracts," he ordered. And Luke, holding his own gun in the hand hidden from Southern by his own body, shoved it back into leather, suppressing a grin.

"Don't try to pull no fast ones, neither, because my gal can read, and she'll go all over them papers for me."

He started naming off his ten top hands, and Luke wrote the names in the space provided in each contract for the beneficiary. But the agitated oldster left the inspection of the documents to Merle. He nodded in satisfaction at each familiar name, and signed impatiently as the agent of the insured.

When the last policy was thus completed, he rushed off to saddle and ride to the assistance of his men, leaving a sheaf of bills with Merle to cover the payments.

Luke wrote in the special condition clause that Merle had suggested. And minutes later they, too, pulled out for the south bank of the Missouri.

* * *

LUKE was getting jittery before Sioux Jamison finally hove up out of the night in answer to Merle's whistle. Unless something happened, men were going to start dying wholesale on this range within a few hours, as soon as it was light enough for shooting.

"Bronc?" Merle called softly as a horseback shadow appeared suddenly before them. Luke found his gun in his hand.

"It's me, honey," a low strong voice answered. "Who's with you?"

"He's a stranger, Bronc," the girl answered. "I think he's brought something that will help us."

Quickly she sketched the plan which Luke and she had evolved.

"It might work," young Jamison conceded. "But I don't know about dad. He doesn't take up with new ideas very quickly. He'll want a week to think it all over. That'll be just a week too long."

"I think I can make him buy without thinking about it too long," Luke declared. "I'm learning more about this business right along. But can you keep him from looking the contracts over too close?"

"From three feet on out he can see like an eagle," the young rancher chuckled solemnly. "But closer than that he can hardly read his own name without his glasses. I'll swipe his specks."

"Good idea," Luke agreed. "This whole scheme depends on me being able to write in the name of his man as the beneficiary, and the name of a Badlander as the insured, on each policy he signs. Then it'll look to his men as if he insured the Badlanders. It's a lead pipe cinch they'll stop and do some thinking when they realize that if the Badlander gets killed, they lose ten thousand dollars. Because a special clause we've written in states that the deal is off if the insured dies of lead poisoning or any violent causes. That'll make fighting too expensive for them, I hope. It would for most folks."

"I don't think any of them hate each other ten thousand dollars worth," Bronc Jamison declared. "It's worth a try, anyhow. Let's go try our luck on the old man."

WING JAMISON was fully as imposing a figure of a man as old Cap Southern, and he was not crippled. He looked sleepy and short tempered when he clumped out, with his son, into the kitchen where Luke waited.

"This fellow got waylaid by the Bugle bunch last evening," Bronc explained. "He just got away, and he's got something to tell you."

"Inman's my name," Luke began, offering his hand, which he instantly regretted as the oldster's grip clamped down on it. "I represent a company that will give a hundred to one odds that you, or any other man I judge a fit specimen, won't die within this next year," Luke explained. "It's called life insurance, because if you, or any man who had been insured, die before the year's up, my company pays one hundred dollars on every dollar you put up. That goes to whoever you name in the contract."

"Why the hell do you come around here wasting my time this hour of the night?" old Jamison demanded hotly. "Any fool

knows I ain't going to die this year! I don't need none of your insurance stuff. I—"

"Dad, for gosh sakes, let him do the talking," Bronc cut in.

"What's the matter, you soft-headed young ninney?" the old range king turned on his son. "Ain't you satisfied? Don't you think I'd leave enough for you to get along on if I cashed in my chips? Trying to make sure of a little money that your badlander friends steal from you if they happened to get a bushwhack shot into my carcass? I—"

"I guess he ain't as smart as Cap Southern," Luke announced matter-of-factly to the four walls, picking up his hat and turning toward the door as if to go.

A heavy hand caught him by the shoulder and spun him around. "What's this about that old old mangy, red-headed thing being smarter than me?"

"I was trying to tell you," Luke replied evenly, meeting the oldster's burning eyes without a waver, "you can buy this insurance on some friend's life too, as well as your own. Now, Cap Southern bought ten thousand dollars worth on each of his ten top hands. He figures if your men kill them off, he'll have one hundred thousand; that's enough to import an army that can wipe your Plains Pool off the map."

"Why that old hellion! Trying to pull another sneaky fast one," Jamison belatedly. "He can't out-smart me like that!"

"He had me locked up in a cellar," Luke went on, still garbling the facts slightly because he figured the situation justified it, "so I couldn't get to you and let you buy any insurance. I managed to get away and figured it was only right to head this way and give you a chance at it. But if you aren't interested—" Again he shrugged and turned to go.

"Sit down here!" Again the agitated oldster grabbed him. "Where's my specks? You know the ten top men in the Pool, Bronc. Have him get to writing while I find my specks. I'll show that slick-eared old hellion how to pull a fast one on me!" He stomped away in search of his glasses.

Luke pointed out to the youngster, "The way I figure to rig the deal, it'll make them mix up together. Each man will be looking after an enemy, seeing to it the enemy doesn't take any chances on violent death and beat him out of his ten thousand.

After looking after each other for a year or so, likely as not each pair will have forgotten all about hating each other. If they get to getting hostile again, whoever starts talking up the fight is likely to make a slip and put himself out in the open. Take care of him, and the war on this range will be over permanent."

"I reckon you're right," young Jamison agreed. "Plenty of the boys that're fighting on opposite sides now used to be saddle mates. I don't rightly know how it got started, but this fight just built up little by little. I've always had the feeling that some sidewinder son was playing both ends against the middle figuring he'd rake in the pot after they'd killed each other off fighting."

Old Wing came storming back then. "Where in tarnation are them glasses?"

on its face. Then the feud-busting drummer was ready to ride.

"What luck?" Merle asked anxiously when the two men hurried back to the place where she waited with the horses.

"So far, so good," Bronc nodded, helping her into the saddle. "Now, if we can beat daylight to Howling Dog!"

"I'm an insurance selling fool," Luke chuckled as he swung aboard his sorrel. "I'll give you odds we do. I'd like to beat your old man out there, too."

"That'll be easy," young Jamison assured. He stepped into his own saddle and they got under way. "Dad still tries to ride the roughest string in his remuda. He'll be an hour getting saddled."

Bronc led off then, setting a brisk pace. It was rough going, but they held to a steady gait. Already a few men had died

YOU CAN'T beat a Panzer Division with a pea-shooter, nor knock down Zeros with sling-shots! Make sure that our service men will never have to fight without effective weapons—by going over your ten per cent quota, and—

BUY U. S. WAR BONDS!

he was complaining. "I never can find the danged things when I need 'em."

He searched through kitchen drawers, poking in here and there. Finally he gave it up in disgust.

"You read them things over, Bronc," he directed. "See they're all right, and I'll sign 'em. Then I got to get down the river to Howling Dog. Damn them underhanded Badlanders!" he broke off with a savage growl.

He scrawled his name impatiently to each policy as his son handed them over. Then he grabbed spurs from a nail beside the door and hurried out.

QUICKLY Luke finished filling out the forms. Each group of policies contained the same pairs of names, except that the man named as the insured on a policy signed by Cap Southern was named as the beneficiary on the one signed by Wing Jamison, thus creating ten pairs of enemies with ten thousand dollars worth of interest in each other. Each contract went into an envelope with the name of the beneficiary

when the Association men closed their trap on the raiders from the little Badland outfits. But many more were marked for death just as sure as dawn came before the enemy factions were supplied with a reason for not fighting.

They had covered a fast and hard ten miles, Luke judged, when he caught the first faint, far-off sounds of gun-fire.

"Keeping their guns warmed up so they'll be limbered up good, come daylight," young Jamison raised his voice above the pound of their horses' hoofs as he caught the sound, too. It was light enough now that Luke could see the grim set that came into his features. They urged their horses to take the rough going a little faster.

CHAPTER THREE

Brimstone Bait

GOOD shooting light was only minutes away when Bronc Jamison reined in as they reached the crest of a ridge. The gunfire was directly before them.

"Dad's men and neighbors are strung out on the rims on either side of the gulch just ahead," young Jamison explained quickly. "It leads up from a ford across the river. How they knew the Badlanders would cross there, I don't know. But it sounds like they've got them boxed up."

"Is there any way Merle can get in to Cap's men?" Luke asked.

"I'll yell for the Pool men to hold their fire," Bronc said. "She can go tearing down the upper end of the draw and be in before they know how she did it."

"Well, I guess it's up to you kids from here on out," Luke sighed, pulling a handful of long envelopes from either saddle pocket. He handed the proper groups to each of them. "The names are on the envelopes. You deliver them and tell them the story. Good luck."

"If this works, we'll sure remember you, mister," Merle Southern declared. Then she reined away, pulling out for the head of the gulch.

"I'll see yuh, friend," Bronc Jamison said. He touched his horse with spur tips and headed across the last gully to the ridge just beyond.

Luke's sorrel wanted to get going too. So he headed for the ridge, keeping behind, but bringing himself near enough to hear what went on at the showdown.

"Hold your fire, Prairie Pool! Hold your fire!" Bronc called, reining up as he reached the rim above Howling Dog, rearing his horse as he yelled to keep from being skylined to the marksmen below. Even so, someone down there tried the shot and the young rancher's hat was snatched from his head by hot lead. He quit his mount as the horse stampeded.

Then someone was yelling: "Who's that riding into the draw? Stop—"

"Hold your fire!" Bronc was bellowing in anxiety, fearful lest someone fail to recognize Merle and try to down her. But his voice must have been heeded, for the sporadic firing died out, momentarily.

"Tom MacMurtie," Bronc called. "You here?"

A big fellow wormed out from shelter he had found behind a rock overlooking the gulch.

"Do you hate anyone bad enough to be willing to lose ten thousand dollars in order to see him dead?"

"What!" the big Scot cowman exclaimed in surprise. "Hell, no! I'd live with the Devil himself for that much money. What kind of foolishness you up to, Jamison?"

"No foolishness," his young neighbor assured him, and pulled up before the rancher. He drew an envelope from the bunch in his other hand. "Here's a contract insuring Buck Henessey's life for ten thousand dollars. It names you to collect that amount if Buck dies in bed of old age or some other natural cause—like too much whiskey. But it won't pay you one red cent if he dies of lead poison."

He hurried on, calling another name as the wondering Scot cowman pulled the insurance policy out of the envelope and looked it over.

"Even if it ain't on the level, I can't gamble on losing that much money until I'm sure," MacMurtie muttered as he belly-crawled back to the rim.

"Hey, Buck Henessey, you down there?" he demanded in a far carrying bellow. "Buck Henessey—"

"That you, Tom?" a voice drifted up from below.

"Hey, Pool, hold your fire and let Buck come up," MacMurtie ordered. "Come on up Buck. I want to see yuh."

"I can't pull out on my saddle-mates, Tom," Buck's voice drifted up again. There was a moment's silence. Then MacMurtie bellowed: "Tell them to hold their fire then, Buck. I'm coming down."

Luke glanced behind at that moment. He caught a brief glimpse of a big, fast traveling ridge-runner sky-lined back there.

Old Wing Jamison would be showing up shortly. And Luke decided it might be better if by then he was traveling toward other parts. The two old faction heads weren't going to like it a little bit, at least not at first, when they found their top men mixing up together.

He reined in behind MacMurtie. "I'll go down the gulch with you, friend, if you don't mind," he said.

By the time they reached a place where a trail dropped off the plains into the torturous gulch, several other Pool men were strung out behind them. And as they came into sight of the place where the Badlanders had taken cover to make their stand, Cap Southern's men began showing them-

selves, recognizing Pool men in whom they had a new and special interest.

He passed Merle Southern as she handed out and explained the last insurance contract. But he saw a red-bearded figure hobbling his wary way from cover to cover up the gulch, not far below. Cap Southern was going to be in on the re-union too. So Luke only waved as he passed Merle and kept going.

"It's up to you and Bronc now," he called. "I've got to get the duplicates to the railroad and get them mailed East to make this insurance good."

"Don't forget the trail back," the girl called, as Luke kicked the sorrel into a lope, heading down for the river. . . .

GRANDDAD COY was sober, when Luke reined to a stop before the Bugle Livery that morning. A jolly sun was sitting on the eastern horizon looking the old world over before starting his daily climb. The fresh smell of dew was still on the air. But from the oldster's sour look he was enjoying none of it.

"What do you say this morning, old-timer?" Luke greeted him cheerfully as he stepped down from the saddle.

"How's the fight going on?" the oldster rasped.

"It's over," Luke replied. His old bed horse heard him then and looked around to nicker. He walked in beside the horse, brushed him off, and began throwing on the pack outfit.

"So the fight's over!" the oldster snarled crankily. "Who won, that's what I want to know, you knot-head!"

"I did," Luke replied. "I won my spurs as a feud-buster and a drummer, both. I'm a business man in my own right."

As the oldster snorted and shuffled away, Luke heard a horseman stop outside, but went on rigging his bed horse. For that moment he wasn't on guard against trouble. He found it, however, scowling at him when he turned back into the driveway.

Old Coy leaned against a stall partition on one side of the driveway, a double-barreled shotgun pointed in Luke's general direction. Standing in the mouth of an empty stall directly across from the oldster was the burly Badlander called Blackie, his sixgun in one hand.

As the marshal of tough trail-towns, Luke had been in some real tights. This looked as bad as any of them, but the experience of the past was serving him. Before they could invent an excuse for squeezing triggers he had to get as near as he could to a spot that would put them in each other's line of fire.

He pretended not to see them and headed for the street. His unexpected action took them off-guard so that he lacked only a few paces of being abreast of them, in the center of the driveway, before Blackie acted.

"Hold on!" the renegade challenged. "I want to see you."

Luke pulled up with seeming surprise. "Something the matter with your insurance, Blackie?"

"Mighty smooth, aren't you?" Blackie growled. "Granddad and I been here getting the ground ready for this range war five years, now. And you ride in at the last minute and curdle the deal in one night. Murdered my partner, Cherokee Smith, too—"

"You griping about having a chance at ten thousand dollars handed to you?" Luke demanded with seeming incredulosity.

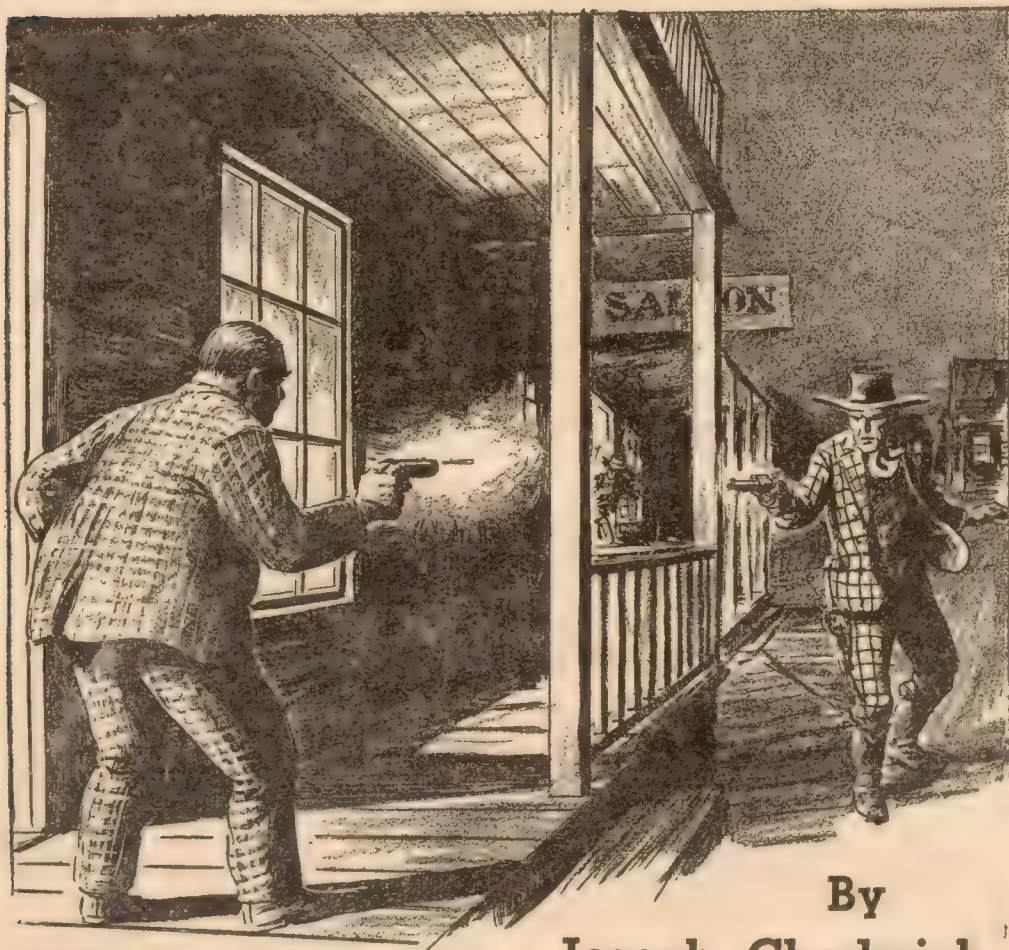
"Ten thousand!" Blackie sneered. "What's that, against a million? And with that high-toned Southern female thrown in to boot! We're going to walk in, with shirt-tail kin we've got waiting not far away, and take over this whole range on both sides the river, when these fools get done killing each other off. You trumped the deal last night, but when they find your dead carcass and the papers and money gone, making their damned insurance no good, they'll—"

Luke dove forward. Again the surprise of his action in the very face of their guns off balanced them. For the moment all either of them could think of was keeping his gun on the fast moving target.

Directly between them Luke paused, then dropped flat on the floor. Reflex, more than thought, squeezed the triggers on that momentarily unmoving target. But Luke was touched by only a single burning buck-shot, as the oldster screamed, Blackie's slug tearing through him. Blackie folded up, riddled with shot.

"Excitin' business!" Luke Inman exclaimed. He picked himself up and went to get his horses ready to travel.

The Drummer Deals in Death



His gun blazed once. . . .

By
Joseph Chadwick

AS MUCH as any man, Sam Bassett was a part of the cow and mining country. Yet he had managed, until the Barrville stage holdup, to keep aloof from those constant feuds which so often developed into sanguinary warfare. That aloofness was good business sense, for Sam, being a whiskey drummer, desired to deal with all manner of men. Rotund and jovial, he liked nothing better than to say, in all

friendliness, "My line? Spirits, sir—for use in moderation!"

But that night at Broken Gap, when the wild bunch stopped the stage, he could no longer keep his neutrality. For, by ill chance, he recognized one of the masked holdup men.

It was just after sundown, with the thick purple dusk blanketing the flatlands. The six little Spanish mules were racing for the

Should Sam Bassett, peaceable whiskey drummer, turn in Rod Taggart as a wanted killer, thus becoming a human target for those sure-death guns—or keep silent, and betray his honest cow-country friends?

feed corral at Barrville, five miles away, and the Concord was swaying gently on its thoroughbrace. Sam, one of five passengers, was napping in his corner of the seat when a strident voice called out, "Pull up!"

The stage was carrying a Denver-bound shipment of gold bullion. Up on the box, Shotgun-Guard McVale swore a round oath and tried to bring his weapon into play. The shotgun blasted, then a sixgun roared and McVale uttered a cry.

"Pull up, dammit!" the harsh voice yelled. "Pull up!"

Charlie Hibbs, the whip handler, sawed on the ribbons and kicked the brake. The Concord lurched to a grinding stop. The passengers were thrown into a noisy panic, all except Sam Bassett, and he merely wrinkled his nose at the acrid smell of burned gunpowder. This was no concern of his, Sam told himself.

Four masked riders surrounded the stalled coach. One leaned from the saddle and leveling a gun at the passengers, jerked open the door.

"Climb out and line up," the man ordered. "But keep reachin' high!"

The passengers obeyed. Besides Sam, there was an Army captain and his young wife, a Barrville merchant and a down-at-heel cowboy. All kept hands raised as they lined up beside the stage; only the cowboy wore a gun. The outlaw facing them said, "All right, now. No tricks, and nobody'll git hurt."

McVale's body hung head-down from the box, arms dangling. Charlie Hibbs held his arms high, his bewhiskered face working as he furiously chewed a tobacco cud. Two of the masked men were dismounting. The one who seemed the leader remained mounted and well back from the stage. He said, "Boys, fetch down that box!"

It was then that Sam Bassett had his first inkling of recognition. That voice—a distinctive voice, one with a faint lisp—seemed vaguely familiar. The other passengers watched the two outlaws climb up to take the bullion box from the forward boot, but Sam eyed the outlaw leader. He did not consciously want to know the man; he could not help himself. Curiosity got the best of him.

The three other outlaws were clad roughly. But their leader was something of a dude in his dress; he wore a good black

suit, a newish flat-crowned gray sombrero—and on his left hand, which held his mount's reins, he wore a ring.

The light was failing, uncertain, and to the drummer's eyes that ring was but a whitish object on the outlaw's hand. But Sam knew it; it was a white cameo in a gold setting. Shocked, Sam grunted with surprise. The Army captain turned and stared at him. He followed Sam's intent gaze to the outlaw leader. Then the outlaw yelled out, impatiently, "Watch it, watch it!"

His two men had lifted the bullion box from the stage boot. They were easing it to the ground. It was a heavy chest, bound with iron and padlocked. One of the men fired a shot and shattered the padlock. He lifted the chest's lid and began taking out gold bars. Working quickly, the two dismounted men emptied the chest, distributing the bars into their saddle bags. The job finished, the leader said, "All right, boys. Let's ride!"

In another minute, they were riding off into the thickening darkness. The cowboy grabbed out his sixgun, and would have fired after the wild bunch had not Sam Bassett grabbed his arm.

"Hold on, hothead!" Sam muttered. "You draw their fire, and the lady here is liable to get hurt!"

The Army captain said, "That's right—no shooting!" He swung on Sam Bassett. "You recognized one of those men, friend?"

Sam said, "Can't say that I did."

After all, he could not swear that the wild bunch leader was Rod Taggart. He could have been wrong about the masked man's voice; and he was quite sure that more than one man sported a white ring. Sam told himself he did not want to bear false witness. . . .

THE ARRIVAL of the stage at Barrville created a furor. An excited crowd gathered to watch McVale's body handed down from the Concord and carried away. Charlie Hibbs, the driver, explained to the stage company agent about the holdup, and how McVale had been killed. "The sneakin' sons killed him for a chest of bullion," Charlie said. "Me, I aim to see them hang!"

Sam Bassett was waiting for the driver to hand his sample case down from the

stage's rear boot. He felt as badly as anyone about McVale's death; he had known the gun-guard for about a dozen years. As Charlie Hibbs kept saying, McVale had been a good man. Sam's mind was full of uneasy thoughts.

Barrville's sheriff, Ed Hackett, a lean and earnest young man, shouldered his way through the crowd. Charlie Hibbs again told his story, and this time the stage passengers chimed in excitedly. The lawman listened, then asked, "Any of you folks recognize any of the holdup men?"

Charlie Hibbs growled, "Sheriff, they was masked to the eyes!"

The Army captain said, "One of them was a big man, Sheriff, and he was better dressed than you'd expect a road-agent to be. He was wearing a black suit and a gray sombrero. I'll know him again, if I see him." He turned to look at Sam Bassett. "I thought the drummer recognized him, but he claims not."

Sam said, "As the captain says, Sheriff, the leader of the crew was no ordinary hardcase."

"Who did you think he was?" Sheriff Hackett asked.

"Can't say, Sheriff. I had a notion he was somebody I knew, but I can't be sure because of the mask he was wearing."

The down-at-heel cowboy muttered, "That drummer stopped me from throwing lead." He patted his holstered sixgun. "I could have picked 'em off like they were sittin' prairie dogs."

Sam said, "I was thinking of the lady, the captain's wife. If there had been shooting, she might have been hit." He saw how everyone stared at him, and a hot flush crept up his neck to his round face. "Those men were trigger-quick," he said. "Look how they killed McVale!"

Sheriff Hackett said, "Well, I'll do what I can," and turned into the stage-company office with the agent.

Charlie Hibbs opened the Concord's boot and began handing out the luggage. Sam got his valise and sample case, then moved hurriedly away. He was aware that Hibbs, the other passengers, and even the curious crowd, were regarding him with something akin to hostility. It was the first time in his life that he had experienced the unfriendliness of people, and he was troubled and uneasy. Sam hurried along Main

Street to the town's only hotel, the Union.

At the hotel, Sam went up to his room and washed up. He dusted his suit with a whiskbroom, then took a clean shirt and a new string tie from his valise. By the time he got his thinning hair brushed he felt better. He felt cheerful enough to whistle. He expected to take some sizable orders at the saloons and honkytonks on Esperanza Street, but there was another reason for his enjoying this stop at Barrville. There was a certain someone he looked forward to seeing. . . .

AFTER supper at the hotel, Sam headed for Esperanza Street with his heavy sample case. Long experience on the road had taught him that a saloon operator was most apt to place a big order during the hours his bar was busy. Accordingly, Sam made his calls in the evening. Now, passing up the smaller places, he turned into Frisco Lil's Palace.

Frisco Lil's was ornate and big; it was a gaudy gathering spot for lonely cowboys, tired miners and bored townsmen. Its bar was long and crowded, its faro tables were busy, and there were plenty of girls. The long lamplit room was hazy with tobacco smoke, noisy with voices and tinny music from piano and fiddles. Sam saw Frisco Lil, a handsome blonde woman, as he came through the swinging doors. She was moving through the crowd, speaking a gay word here and there.

"Why, Sam Bassett! You old son-of-a-gun!"

Frisco Lil's voice was like herself, lush and hearty. She swept down on Sam and gave him a hug. With her bleached hair and red velvet dress, she might appear too gaudy to some men. But to Sam Bassett she possessed a beauty that made other women pale in comparison. Her age was her own secret, but he had known her, from Saint Louis to the Barbary Coast, for almost twenty years. Sam chuckled and hugged her.

"Lil, you're a sight for sore eyes," he said.

"It's good that business brings you here some times," she replied, pouting prettily, "else I'd never see you."

"That reminds me," Sam said. "How's business, Lil?"

"Good enough, you old rascal. Come

into my office, and I'll let you stick me for an order."

She took his arm and led him across the room. They passed a faro table, and one of the players looked up and said, "Howdy, Mr. Bassett."

Sam's nerves jumped. He knew that voice; it had trouble pronouncing its s's, because of a slight lisp. Sam looked down at the man, saying thickly, "Howdy, Taggart." A cheroot dangled from Rod Taggart's grinning lips. The man's eyes were narrow and chill in his dark, lean face. They followed Sam as he moved on with Frisco Lil.

At the office door, over in the corner, the drummer paused and looked back. Taggart was wearing his cameo ring, but instead of a black suit and a gray sombrero, such as the wild-bunch leader had worn, he was clad in a gray checked suit. His hat was a black Stetson.

Taggart's metallic glance met Sam's eyes from half across the room. The man grinned again, mirthlessly, and Sam Bassett turned hurriedly into the office and closed the door. He had no doubts. Despite a change of clothes, Rod Taggart was the man. And Taggart was wondering if Sam had recognized him as the owlhoot leader.

Frisco Lil had turned up the old lamp on the rolltop desk. She stared at Sam, and said, "What's wrong, partner? You look like you'd just seen a ghost."

"Me? Nothing wrong with me, Lil."

Sam opened his sample case, showing an arrangement of bottled whiskeys. He took out a bottle, saying, "Now here's some Scotch, Lil. Real imported stuff, aged in casks aboard British ships." He broke the seal, removed the cork with a corkscrew, filled a glass from his case. "Try that," he said, handing the glass to the woman.

She downed the drink, smacked her lips. "Ah, that's good stuff." She shook her golden head. "But it's no good for my customers. Just put me down for a couple dozen cases of cheap, ordinary rotgut. You know, the kind cowpokes go for."

Sam sighed. "All right," he said. "But it's a shame."

Frisco Lil chuckled and took the bottle of Scotch. She put it away in her desk drawer. As Sam wrote up an order, she talked about old times—about pleasant

happenings during their meetings throughout the years. Her voice grew soft, dreamy, and there was a wistful look in her eyes. Sam listened with scant attention; he was thinking of Rod Taggart, of that strange holdup, and of the dead McVale.

Frisco Lil's voice stopped in the middle of a sentence. She looked provoked. "Sam, what's the matter with you? You're not listening to a word I say!"

Sam gave a start. "Sorry, Lil, but I've got something on my mind."

"Well, out with it," she said bluntly. "You and I have no secrets from each other. If you're in trouble, maybe I can help you."

SAM hesitated, but finally said, "I was on the stage when it was held up early tonight, Lil. You heard about it, I reckon. McVale, the gun-guard, was killed. The gang got away with a shipment of bullion."

"I heard about it. But why are you worked up?"

"Lil, I wouldn't tell another soul—" Sam mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "I think I know one of the men in the wild bunch. I'm not sure, mind you, but I've got an idea who it might be." He gave the honkytonk proprietress an uncertain look. "You know how I am, Lil. I mind my own business, and keep out of other men's trouble. But this has got me worried. I don't know if I should talk to the sheriff, or keep quiet."

Frisco Lil nodded. "I know how you feel about it, Sam. In my business, I learn all sorts of things, some good and some bad. I keep my mouth shut." She reached out and patted Sam's hand. "But I can't advise you either way, my friend. It's something you'll have to work out for yourself."

Sam nodded gloomily. "I'll sleep on it tonight," he said. "Maybe by morning I'll know what to do."

He shoved his order book into his coat pocket, started closing his sample case. "See you again before I leave town, Lil."

"Sure, Sam—sure."

He opened the door, looked out over the crowded honkytonk. Rod Taggart was no longer at the faro table. Behind him, Frisco Lil said, "Sam, you're scared. You're nervous about something." She lowered her voice to a tense whisper. "Sam,

does that hold-up man know you recognized him?"

Sam half turned. He did not want to worry Frisco Lil, so he forced a grin and said, "Of course not! How could he know?"

He went out, closing the door after him.

But Sam Bassett was scared. He knew Rod Taggart personally and by reputation. Taggart was a sharpster, a shrewd tinhorn, and he had killed men. The man was a bad one to cross.

Sam searched the crowd on his way out of the Palace, but he did not see Taggart. He breathed easier, and just as he reached the swing doors, Taggart's lisping voice halted him. "One minute, Bassett."

Taggart came from the shadows at the side of the building. He was a big man, six inches taller than the drummer. His coat was thrown open, and he had his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his flowered vest—an easy drop to his gunbelt. His smile was vague in the half-light from the honkytonk's windows.

"Been hoping to meet up with you again, Bassett," he said. "You won four hundred dollars from me six months back. I want a chance to make up my loss. How about a poker game tonight?"

"Make it tomorrow night, Taggart," Sam said uneasily. "I'll be busy tonight. Got to work for a living, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Taggart's voice was low. "Some hombres have a way of making big money easy. Like those gunslicks that held up the stage early tonight. I hear you were on that stage, friend. Did you get a look at any of the wild bunch?"

Sam's voice cracked as he quickly said, "Not—not a look, Taggart."

"Too bad you didn't, eh?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. Except that if you had recognized one of those road-agents, the sheriff would be mighty grateful."

Sam began to sweat. His sample case felt as heavy as lead. He wanted to run. He moistened his lips, and said, "The sheriff questioned me, but I couldn't tell him anything. You know me, Taggart—Sam Bassett, whiskey drummer. I mind my own business, and let the Law do its own manhunting. Well, I've got to make some calls. See you tomorrow night, friend—over the poker table."

"Yeah," said Taggart, seeming to relax. "Over the poker table."

SAM went about his business, but somehow his heart wasn't in his work after that encounter with Rod Taggart. He kept thinking that he was in a tight hole, even though he had eased Taggart's suspicions for the moment. While talking to the Esperanza Street saloonmen, his mind kept conjuring up a picture of Rod Taggart's metallic eyes, of the man's hand poised above his holstered gun. Sam finally realized that he was making few sales. He quit for the night.

On the way back to the hotel, Sam came to Len Harmon's drugstore on Main Street. He halted, hesitated a moment, then went into the dingy little storeroom. The druggist was drowsing in a tilted-back chair, but he roused and greeted, "Howdy, Sam. What can I do for you?"

"Len, I was on the stage when it was held up," Sam said. "I saw McVale killed, and I'm still upset. When I get like this, I can't sleep nights. I was wondering if you could sell me something that would help me get a night's rest."

"Well, I've got some sleeping powders, Sam."

"Fix me up, Len, and I'll be obliged to you."

The druggist took a glass jar from a shelf, weighed out some whitish powder into papers. He folded the papers neatly and pushed them across the counter, saying, "Don't take more than one at a time. An overdose might put you to sleep for twenty-four hours—maybe longer. That'll be a dollar, Sam."

Sam paid him, pocketed the sleeping powders, and went on to the hotel. Up in his room, he poured a glass of water from the washstand pitcher and mixed in one of the powders. He drank the dose, which was all but tasteless, then undressed and got into bed. He became drowsy almost at once, then slept soundly.

In the morning, Sam broke his rule for waiting until the saloons' busiest hours. He started out after breakfast and called on the trade. He had decided to finish up in Barrville in a hurry, then take the late afternoon stage out of town. He wanted to get as far away from Rod Taggart as possible. He made his last call at three

o'clock, then went back to the hotel for his valise. He paid his bill, checked out, carried his valise and sample case to the stage station. He paid the agent for the trip to Denver, then sat down to wait. The stage was due between four and five o'clock, but, like yesterday, it might be a couple of hours late.

He was sitting there looking out the window when Sheriff Ed Hackett came riding in from somewhere. The young lawman looked as though he had made a hard ride; he slumped in the saddle, and his lean face wore a frown. He noticed Sam at the window, and reined in before the stage office. He called out, "Drummer, I'd like a word with you."

Sam rose with an uneasy mind, and went outside. He said, "Anything I can do for you, Sheriff?"

Ed Hackett hooked a leg around the saddle horn, then thoughtfully built and lighted a quirly. Then: "Bassett, I've been out to the scene of the holdup twice. I trailed the wild bunch. Their tracks split up a mile from the scene. Smart hombres. But I did some tracking, and those road-agents all headed, finally, for Barrville. That means they're here in town, figuring they're safe."

"I reckon you're right, Sheriff," Sam said unsteadily.

Hackett laid a stern look on him. "Bassett, I talked to that Army captain again today. He still thinks that maybe you recognized the leader of that wild bunch. I'm asking you to remember that you're a law-abiding citizen—"

Sam's attention wavered. Across the street, the door to the barber shop opened and Rod Taggart came out into the bright sunlight. Taggart came across the street, moving without haste but walking directly to where Sam and the lawman stood talking.

Taggart showed a smile, but his eyes had a veiled look. He said, "You pick up the trail of the wild bunch yet, Sheriff?"

"Not yet, Taggart," Hackett muttered.

"You think Bassett here might have recognized one of them?"

"I keep hoping he did," Hackett said, and turned back to the drummer. "What do you say, Bassett?"

Sam swallowed hard. He was caught between two fires. Ed Hackett was young,

but he was no fool; the lawman had his suspicions. And Rod Taggart, the drummer realized, had been watching him from the barber shop. The tinhorn had come to hear the talk between him and the sheriff. Sam shook his head.

"I didn't know any of the wild bunch," he said thickly. "Like you said, I'm a law-abiding citizen. And if I could help you round up those sons, I'd sure do it!"

Ed Hackett eyed him narrowly. He said, "Suppose you don't take the stage out today. Maybe I'll have a suspect for you to identify soon." He straightened in the saddle, and rode away.

SAM BASSETT bought a gun that evening. He went to Pop Ganby's gunsmith shop and stated his needs. He wanted a small pocket gun, a weapon that he could hide on his person and have handy in case it came to a showdown. The gunsmith said, "I've got a five-shot derringer here. It's a .32 caliber, and only good for close range shooting. I'll let you have it for twenty dollars."

Sam left the shop with the derringer in his coat pocket, but being armed gave him no sense of security. He knew Rod Taggart's reputation as a gunman. He would have little chance if things came to a head, and Taggart forced a shoot-out. From the gunsmith's shop, Sam drifted over to Frisco Lil's honkytonk.

He found a vacant corner table away from the crowd, and Frisco Lil came and sat down with him. The woman wore a bright green dress tonight, and Sam thought she never had looked prettier. It suddenly occurred to him that Frisco Lil would make a man a mighty good wife. He heard himself say, "Lil, I should have married you fifteen years ago."

Frisco Lil's eyes widened with surprise. "Why, Sam Bassett," she said mockingly. "This is so sudden!"

"Lil, if I had my life to live over—"

"Sam," she said, sobering, "you're still scared!"

"I want you to know, Lil," he went on, "in case anything happens to me, that I think more of you than any woman I ever saw. If only we could turn back the clock—" He shook his head gloomily. "Too late, now."

Frisco Lil tucked at her hair. "Better

late than never, Sam," she said. "I'd make no blushing bride, maybe, but I can still make most women take a back seat when it comes to looks. Say, Sam, is this a gilt-edge proposal?"

Sam had no chance to reply to that. Rod Taggart appeared beside them, and said, "How about that poker game, Sam?" His voice was friendly, almost too friendly.

Sam reluctantly got to his feet. "Sure, Taggart. Let's get started."

"Sure," said Frisco Lil. "Poker before matrimony." He voice was bitter.

The game was held in Sam Bassett's hotel room. Ben Druck, the barber, and a hardcase named Bayman had been invited to sit in by Taggart. Sam had a box of cigars brought up, and he broke open a bottle of Scotch from his sample case.

The game started on low bets, but Sam lost from the beginning. He could not keep his mind on the cards. He had an uneasy feeling that Rod Taggart was watching him, studying his every move and expression. He began to sweat, but he did not remove his coat. He wanted to keep the derringer within easy reach.

In an hour, Sam had lost a hundred dollars. Barber Druck was losing, too. Bayman took a few hands, but the pot kept going to Rod Taggart.

The second hour was worse than the first, in more ways than one. Sam kept losing, but more than that he was worried that his nerve would crack. He was sure now that Taggart was watching him, playing with him in cat-and-mouse fashion.

Druck, the barber, said, "I'm out," and threw down his cards. "How about another drink, Sam?"

Sam said, "Me, too," and rose to pour another round of drinks.

Taggart and Bayman were raising the bets, the hardcase now playing his cards close to his chest. Over at the washstand, Sam poured three drinks. His hands trembled as he held the bottle. He felt trapped. He knew he could not stand the strain much longer. A sudden idea gripped him, and, without thinking it through, he took his two remaining papers of sleeping powder from his vest pocket. His back to the poker table, he emptied the papers into Rod Taggart's glass. With hands trembling more than ever, he poured whiskey over the whitish powder.

Taggart said, "Come on, Sam. It's your deal."

SAM CARRIED the three glasses to the table, careful to set the doped drink before Taggart. He sat down and took up the cards and began to shuffle them. His heart was pounding wildly. Sam had made up his mind. He was going to identify Rod Taggart for the killer he was. He began to deal the cards, then he fumbled.

Taggart, grinning thinly, had reached out and switched drinks with Ben Druck. The barber, lighting a cigar, did not notice the switch.

Taggart said mockingly, "Never deal from the bottom of the deck, Sam. You're no card-sharp." His voice was mocking. "You'll give yourself away."

Bayman looked puzzled. Druck said, "Shucks, Sam wouldn't do any cheating." He lifted his glass, quickly downed the drink. "Good liquor."

Druck began to yawn and grow dull-eyed before the hand was played. He said in a mumbling voice, "Boys, I'm dead tired all at once. Reckon I'll have to hit the hay—" His voice faded. The double dose of sleeping powder had hit him. "Me, I feel blame queer."

He rose and staggered to the door, but he did not quite make it. He sprawled out on Sam's bed.

Taggart drew his sixgun. He was hard-eyed and unsmiling now. "You weren't smart enough, Bassett," he said flatly. "I saw you dope my drink. I wasn't sure until then that you knew I was in on that hold-up." He thumbed back the hammer of his gun. "You made up your mind too late."

Sam said, "Taggart, wait! I would never have talked if you hadn't kept spying on me!"

"Maybe you think that, but it's not so. Your kind always stands by the law in the end." Taggart rose from his chair. "Bayman is in this with me. He'll swear that we caught you cheating at poker."

Sam's fear was suddenly gone. If he had to die, he meant to die like a man. He dropped his hand toward his coat pocket. Then he stopped, as footsteps sounded in the hall. The door was flung open, and a man burst into the room.

"Taggart, Jake was arrested just now by Ed Hackett!" the hardcase said, almost

yelling. "Jake got drunk tonight—he talked. We better light out of town. Sure as shootin', Hackett will be after us!"

Taggart swore. "Nick, you and Bayman go down to the stable and get us horses. I'll be outside when you get there." He gestured at Sam Bassett with his sixgun. "You, drummer, walk ahead of me. Hackett won't be able to shoot around your big belly. Come on—move!"

The two hardcases were pounding down the stairs. Sam walked from the room and along the hall, silently cursing his own helplessness. Taggart was close behind him as he went down the stairs and across the lobby. They stepped out on the porch.

Taggart muttered, "Stand still and keep quiet. If Hackett comes, I'll kill you and then him." Hackett was already coming. Sam saw the sheriff's lean figure moving along the opposite side of the street. Taggart saw him, too, took aim for a sneak shot. Sam could not see another good man killed as McVale had been. He yelled, "Sheriff, watch out!"

Taggart's gun blasted, and Hackett fell back against the front of a store. Taggart jumped down from the hotel porch, and fired again at the lawman. Then he swung around on Sam Bassett, snarling, "You asked for it, drummer!"

But Sam had his derringer out. He fired point-blank at Taggart, and saw the man stumble. Taggart's gun fired a third

time, but his shot was wide of the drummer. Sam fired again, and now Rod Taggart fell to the street.

Sam Bassett slumped down onto the porch steps, his knees too weak to hold him. He let the smoking derringer fall from his hand.

An excited crowd gathered. It seemed to Sam Bassett's dazed mind that all of Barrville was there, jammed about him and the dead Rod Taggart. Young Sheriff Hackett, a bullet wound in his right arm, came up and said, "Friend, you sure saved my hide tonight!"

"Don't thank me, Sheriff," Sam said weakly. "I should have talked right after the holdup. I know better now."

He tried to get up, but his knees were still weak and trembling. Somebody held a bottle to his mouth, and he drank. Raw liquor burned his throat, and he choked. "Say, friend," he groaned, "what was that stuff?"

The bottle-holder said, "That was some of the rotgut you sell, Sam," and laughter swept the crowd.

Then Frisco Lil said, "Take that whiskey away from him, you! Sam Bassett never drinks anything stronger than lemonade!" She sat down beside the drummer. "I should know, eh, Sam?"

There was pride in her voice. Sam Bassett looked at her and grinned, all at once feeling better.

THE END



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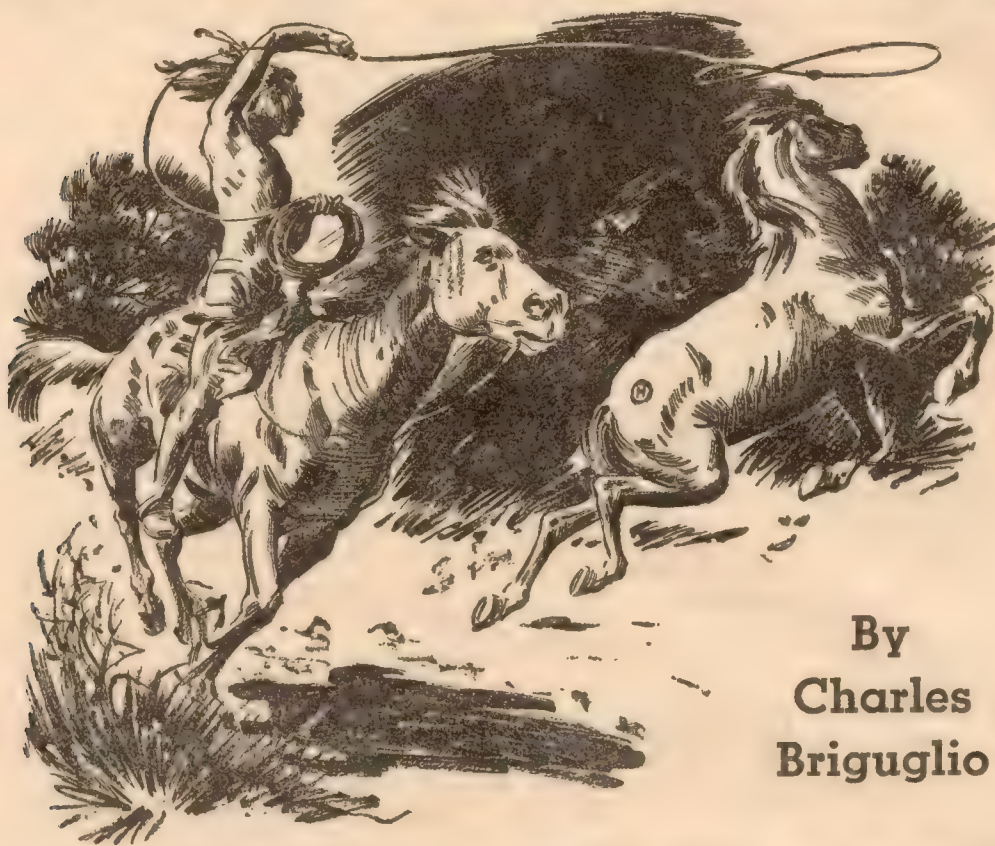
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Mountain-Man's Medicine



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The greater the horse-thief, the greater the warrior. . . .

As mountain-man, buckskin scout and intrepid white chief of a war-like, savage legion, Jim Beckwourth blazed his name in flaming letters across the untamed prairies and rugged mountains of our frontier West. . . .

JIM BECKWOURTH, "White Indian," was in his lodge in the Crow village when the Blackfeet attacked. The air was filled with war-whoops, the crack of guns, and the thundering roar of hoof-beats.

Beckwourth grabbed his weapons and rushed outside. He was in time to see the Blackfeet making off with the horse herd.

The village was thrown into sudden con-

sternation. The war-whoop sounded throughout the camp; Crow warriors rushed to their war-horses tethered before their lodges, mounted and raced madly through the encampment after the Blackfeet.

Along with the Crows, rode Beckwourth and half a dozen white men. Most of them were trappers, had Crow wives, and were free to trap in Absaroka, the home of the Crows, or Sparrowhawk People, without fear of losing their hair.

But Jim Beckwourth was thoroughly at home here.

Born in Virginia, Beckwourth had grown to manhood in St. Louis. In 1824, he had gone up the Missouri in General Ashley's fur brigade to trap beavers in the mysterious Rocky Mountains. After several years with Ashley, during which time he became a swaggering, buckskin mountain man and Indian fighter, he was adopted by the Crows.

That had been in 1826, and had come about because of Beckwourth's swarthy skin. A trapper told the Crows that Beckwourth was really a Crow; and that he had been kidnaped from their village when he was a baby and sold to the whites. The Crows eagerly swallowed this story, and insisted that Beckwourth be restored back to his people. Beckwourth was willing; so he became a bonafide member of the Crows.

Beckwourth readily adopted the ways of the Crows. He dressed like a Crow, looked like one, and acted like one.

Beckwourth rose rapidly in the ranks of the Crows. He became a great warrior, accomplished great deeds against the Crows' enemies, the Blackfeet and the Cheyennes. He became a first rate horse-thief, too, a trait in a warrior admired more than anything else. The Crows called him *Is-ko-chu-e-chu-re*—the Enemy of Horses.

His medicine was good and strong. The mere presence of the Enemy of Horses in any war undertaking was a guarantee of success. His medicine was always good. So would it be now, the Crows reasoned, as they pounded furiously after the horse-thieving Blackfeet.

THE CROWS pressed the Blackfeet so hard, that they were forced to abandon their stolen horses and turn to saving themselves. But even in this, they were doomed to disappointment.

Finding they couldn't get away, the Blackfeet fortified themselves on a huge rock top. The rock was sheer all around, ranging in height from six feet to twenty-five feet. Sprawled flat on the uneven surface, the Blackfeet were prepared to sell their lives dearly.

The Crows rode around the rock jubilantly, confident that they would be dancing around their campfires that night, with the Blackfeet scalps.

Knowing the Crows wouldn't need his help to lick the thirty or so Blackfeet, Beckwourth drew to one side along with the other white men who had come only for the excitement.

"Wagh! Reckon we'll see some fun now!" a trapper exclaimed.

"My Crows will wipe 'em out in no time," Beckwourth replied.

But they didn't. They merely rode around the Blackfeet fortress, never once

thinking to storm it. Some raced across the open to the wall of the rock. Once there the Blackfeet couldn't fire down upon them without exposing themselves to the Crow fire. But in crossing the open, several of the Crows were killed by the Blackfeet.

After a while, even the Blackfeet became impatient and began to taunt the Crows for cowardice.

"Wal, reckon the Blackfeet got their number," one of the trappers said in disgust.

Beckwourth didn't reply, but laying aside his rifle, and with battle-axe in his right hand and war-shield on his left arm, he raced across the open to the rock wall.

In a rage, he turned on the Crows gathered there. "Are you old women and cowards, as the Blackfeet say, that you do nothing?" he shouted. "Is this the way for the Crows to act before their enemies? If you aren't cowards, follow me and I shall show you how to kill Blackfeet."

"We will follow you, Enemy of Horses!" the Crows cried eagerly. "Lead us!"

War-axe gripped tight in his hand, Beckwourth raced toward the lowest section of the rock. He scaled the wall, with dozens of Crows swarming up behind him. Giving the war-whoop, Beckwourth and the Crows sprang to the attack. His lithe, muscular body covered with blood, his long dark hair flying in the breeze, Beckwourth was in the midst of the battle, his war-axe flashing red in the sun. Blackfeet after Blackfeet went down under his savage blows.

In a short time, all the Blackfeet lay dead. None had escaped.

This fight took place in March of 1832, in the Tongue River Valley. For such daring coups, Beckwourth was made head chief of the Crows.

Under his leadership, the Crows became strong and powerful. They were victorious over all their enemies, were feared and respected, no tribe dared intrude on Absaroka, the home of the Crows.

BUT AFTER ten years with the Crows, Beckwourth, tired of glory and the pomp of war, left for peace and civilization. He didn't enjoy either long, for when he reached St. Louis a company of mountain men and Indian fighters were being organized for Uncle Sam's Army to fight the Seminole Indians. Beckwourth joined, he

helped conquer the Seminoles. After this victory he headed West—to become trader to the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and the Sioux.

He served as scout and courier in the Mexican War, and the gold rush of '49 found him in California. He didn't find any gold, but he did find a pass in the impassable Sierra Nevada Mountains, which today still bears his name.

He established a ranch in California, which he endured for several years, then he headed back for his old stamping ground, the plains and the Rockies.

He ran a store in Denver in 1859. After this venture he bought a ranch three miles south of Denver. The pitched tents of Indians were to be seen in his yard at all times, mostly Cheyennes who knew all about the great Enemy of Horses, and who were always welcomed at his home.

After the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, all the plains tribes rose up in arms against the encroaching whites, all except for the Crows who were undecided. The government sent Beckwourth to them, to use his influence to keep them off the warpath.

It had been thirty years since he had left them, but they hadn't forgotten their famous chief, and had always hoped that some day

he would return. Since his departure, their luck had been bad. They had suffered one reverse after another. The mighty Sioux had moved in on Absaroka, and the old Crow medicine was not strong enough to drive them back. There was deep gloom in the camp of the Sparrowhawk People, and they prayed to the Great Spirit to bring the Enemy of Horses back to them.

With the return of the Enemy of Horses, there was great rejoicing in the camp of the Crows. His medicine would be good, and they would drive the Sioux from Absaroka. But the old chief was aged now, old and worthless, and there he died.

The Crows, fearing that he would return back to the whites, had given him a banquet in welcome and had poisoned him. At least, they reasoned, if they couldn't have him, they would have his bones which must remain in Absaroka for the protection of his people.

His medicine had been good while living, so would it be now in death. They would drive the Sioux away from Absaroka, and there would once more be happiness and peace and plenty in the camp of the Sparrowhawk People. For the Enemy of Horses had returned, and his medicine would be good and strong forever.

Curse of the Superstitions

IN 1870 Jacob Walz laughed at the warnings of his friends and entered Arizona's Superstition Range in search of gold. By that act, it is said, the prospector started a blood curse that has dogged the footsteps of every man who has since dared to venture within its forbidding confines.

His story is told in the words engraved on a monument erected close to the only road leading to the Superstitions:

Here lie the remains of Snowbeard, the Dutchman, who in this mountain shot three men to steal a rich gold mine from Spanish pioneers, killed eight more to hold his treasure, then killed himself in 1892 without revealing its location.

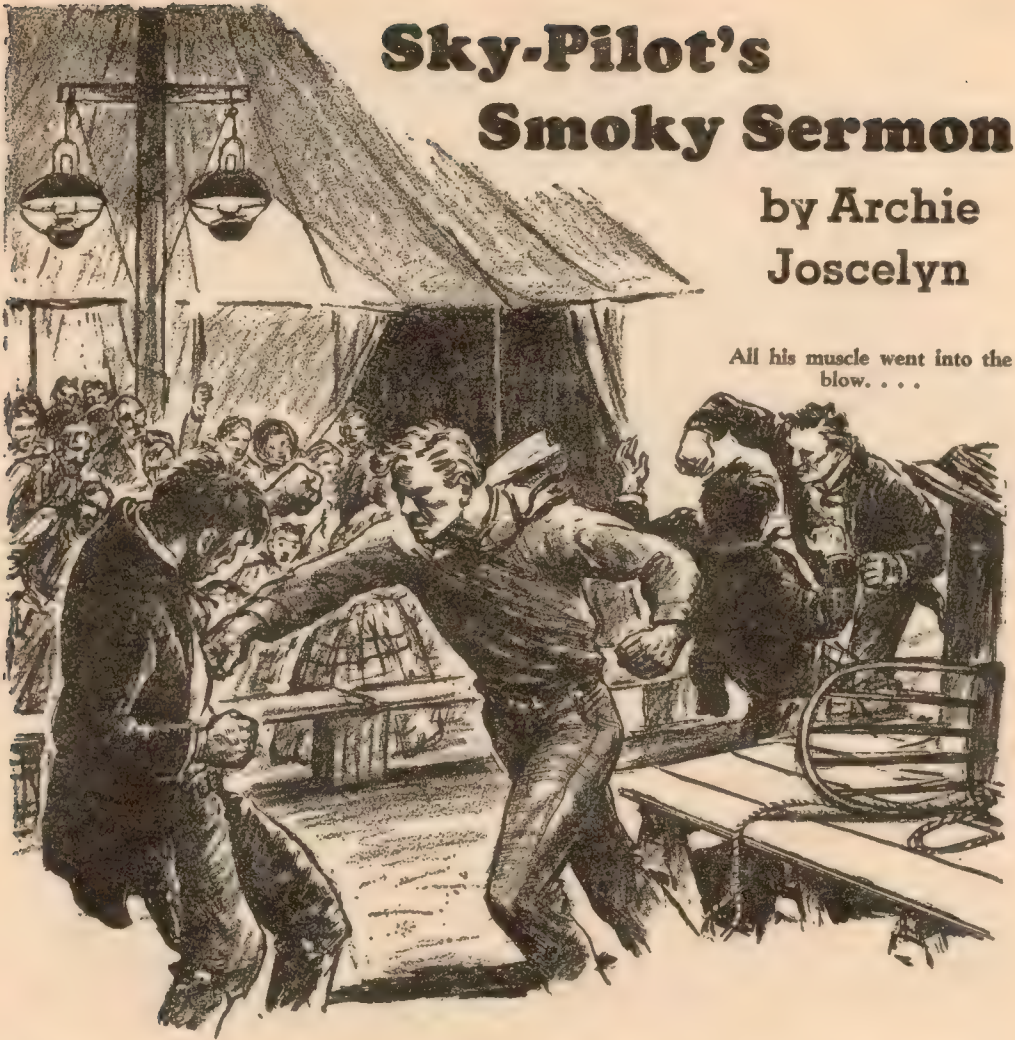
Dozens of searchers have met mysterious deaths in the canyons there, yet the ore lies unrevealed. Indians say this is the curse of the thunder gods on white men in whom the craving of gold is too strong.

BEWARE, lest you, too, succumb to the lure of the Lost Dutchman mine in the Superstition Mountains!

—George Marine

Sky-Pilot's Smoky Sermon

by Archie
Joscelyn



All his muscle went into the
blow. . . .

When tenor-voiced Drake Patton teamed up with that hard-fisted hymn-shouter, he was embarking on a Colt crusade to make the toughest badmen return to the fold—using prayers mixed with powdersmoke!

"It's you that makes my friends my foes,
It's you that makes me wear old clothes—
But since you're up so near my nose,
I'll tip you up and down she g—"

DRAKE PATTON'S rich, musical tenor, lifted to the moon and the edification of any stray coyotes, checked abruptly as another sound disturbed the tranquility of the night, here at the scattered outskirts of the little cowtown. The solid slog of fists on flesh, the labored breathing and grunting of strug-

gling men, a muffled, savage curse. Then he saw them.

One was on the ground, coming uncertainly to hands and knees, looking badly treated. The other three were in such a close-packed huddle that it took Patton, coming closer now with long strides, a few seconds to be certain that there were three of them. Two, inevitably, were pitching onto the other man, but even at that, he saw, it wasn't so one-sided as it might have been. One of the two sailed back from

the bump of a pile-driver fist to tumble head over heels a dozen feet away.

By that time the man on the ground had regained his feet, and he had also found a club. Clutching it, he charged ahead, and Patton saw that he too was joining in the attack, making it three to one, as the second man regained his feet as well. The lone fighter was thick-set and powerful, and fighting gamely, but such odds were too overwhelming for any man to last long. With a joyous whoop, Patton declared himself in.

It had been, he reflected a little wryly, several years since he'd used his hands for anything useful, but he'd been quite a scrapper as a kid—as a poor boy, one in a large family who moved to a new school each year, he'd had small choice—and he hadn't forgotten how. And even if his legs were a little wobbly, there was a lot of good hard muscle on the big frame of him, and excitement buoyed him up. He clutched a coat collar and jerked, then planted himself beside the squat man and went to work.

The result was disappointing. Finding the odds against them doubled just when they had expected victory, the three, already badly used by the battler's fists, took to their heels. Looking down on his companion as he stood there, breathing hard, Patton saw that he hadn't come through it unscathed. He was considerably bruised and rumped, and there was a long smear of blood down his left cheek. But after a moment he turned, surveying Patton keenly, from his tousled yellow hair and smiling face to worn boots, and held out his hand.

"Thanks, friends," he said. "You were a good influence on bad company."

"The odds seemed a bit uneven," he said. "And I long since formed a sympathy for the under-dog, from being one myself. But you know how to use your fists," he added admiringly. "They were as tough a looking crew as I ever saw, but you were pretty well holding your own."

"I was doing my best," the short man agreed modestly. "Was that you singing, a little while ago? I scarcely caught the words, but the voice—"

"Oh, that? I was singing Little Brown Jug, I guess. Hardly a classic piece, but I like to sing—in fact, it's my business, though business, as you might say, is poor

—and when I can't bury my nose in a foaming mug of brew, I can at least sing about it."

The other man eyed him sharply, then nodded.

"Certainly you can sing," he agreed. "I was just going to cook myself a bite to eat, when they—interrupted. Won't you join me?"

"Join you? Brother, it will be a pleasure," Patton grinned. "Food and I are scarcely on speaking acquaintance, but I still have a fond recollection—by all means, lead on."

SMILING quietly, his new friend did so. Something made a darker blur against the night, and then Patton saw that it was a canvas-topped wagon, like a shepherd's van, though Patton had a strong hunch that this man, dressed in sober black, was no shepherd. But what was he? He looked like a pugilist, and used his fists like one. With that garb, and in this Wyoming country, he might be a gambler, and that could account for that bunch of toughs trying to beat him up. His face was square and homely, save when he smiled, but there was an air of quiet assurance about him.

A team of horses was picketed close by, and the faint odor of sage was like a tonic on the air. Patton's host produced a little sheet-iron stove and set it up. Spuds and bacon were soon frying, with biscuits in the dutch oven and coffee bubbling in a pot. Neither man said much until they had satisfied their appetites. Then Patton, seated on a box, while his host sat on the wagon tongue, shoved back with a sigh of content.

"That was ambrosia and nectar," he sighed. "Food for the gods."

"For a hungry man, anyway. Did you say that singing was your business?"

"It used to be. Grand opera. I even had a contract, once upon a time. Then a road show. Which sort of petered out, and left me stranded in the wilderness, if you'll excuse the expression. But it's been more or less literal, of late." He looked at his hands. "I find that, out here where men do things, I'm pretty much of a wart on the scheme of things,—useless, not even ornamental. I tried to get a job digging a ditch, but the boss looked at my hands and said no."

"I liked your voice," said the other man thoughtfully. "It is a gift. I was wonder-

ing if you wouldn't like to go with me, for the present at least. A real singer can be a tremendous help, and while the pay isn't big, still you would share in the collections, and it's a living, besides rendering a real service."

"Singing?" Patton asked, puzzled. "Collections? I don't quite understand. Are you a gambler?"

"You might call me that, in a way," the other man agreed unsmilingly. "I gamble with the devil for souls. I'm a sky-pilot—in other words, a revivalist. Herd is my name, and I try to ride herd on some of these mavericks of the frontier."

Patton stared, amazed. A preacher! He shook his head.

"Er—you don't like a parson," he blurted. "And I—what were those thugs trying to beat you up for, if you're a preacher? I didn't know that sky-pilots ever got into trouble—"

Herd smiled.

"I guess I look more like a pugilist than a preacher," he agreed. "But my ability to use my fists is sometimes useful. And I can assure you, as you have seen, that a preacher frequently has to fight for what is right, with fists as well as tongue. I denounced, from the pulpit, a man who operated a saloon and gambling-hell—a notoriously crooked joint. Many saloon-keepers are good friends of mine, although I don't approve of their business."

"In this instance, I think I accomplished some good, for a deputation of citizens waited upon Brother Brackett and invited him to leave town, for good. I did not, I'm sorry to say, save his soul, but I made that town a better place to live in. Brackett resented it—and from their conversation, I gathered that he had paid those three to get even. There's a risk in working with me, but I gathered that you're not afraid of trouble."

Patton took a deep breath, then stuck out his hand.

"Parson," he said. "I'm your man. How I'll be at it, I don't know. Psalms and hymns are rather out of my line, I'm afraid. But I can sing 'em. And I have a hunch that we'll make a great team!"

HIS HUNCH was strengthened, the next evening, when he heard Herd preach. They had traveled most of the day

in the van, jouncing along a dusty trail, arriving in mid-afternoon at the town of Cottonwood Creek. Just another cowtown, Patton decided, but the creek and the grove of cottonwoods on the outskirts were pleasant.

With the assistance of a handful of people who had invited Herd to come there and hold meetings, they set up the big tent, which, when folded, occupied a part of the wagon. Patton was surprised at its size. It resembled a circus tent, and though it was weather-beaten, it was a good one, aside from various small holes, some of which had been neatly patched, in sides and top. Patton mentioned these, frowning and puzzled.

"Oh, those?" Herd shrugged. "Bullet-holes. It's not uncommon for a bunch of cowboys to get drunk and try to break up the meeting. It adds flavor."

Patton looked at the quiet, square-jawed man, and went on with his work. He had already changed his notions considerably, in regard to a sky-pilot—or this one, at least. Benches, made by placing planks across boxes or kegs, filled a good part of the tent's interior, a platform and pulpit were set up, and lanterns hung from the tent poles. There was a space about a dozen feet wide, all around the benches and pulpit, and the flaps were tied back, leaving a big and inviting open door.

Two newcomers hurried up to greet Herd, explaining that they had been too busy to come sooner. Herd introduced them as Tom and Mardie Markel.

"These two youngsters are like you, Drake," he said. "Tenderfeet, but with new ideas. Tom has started an ice-cream business here, the first in the state, I guess. His sister helps him. How's it going, Tom?"

"Good—and bad," Tom confessed, a little wryly. "Business is great. Folks like ice cream and milk, especially in this warm weather. They like it so well that Kurtz, who owns every saloon in town, seems to be getting worried because he's losing customers."

"He's warned us to quit and get out of town, or take the consequences," Mardie said, and tossed her head. "We aren't running!"

"Not for a crook like Kurtz, anyway," Tom added. "He hasn't worried me much."

But he's got a new partner in the last day or so—a man named Brackett, who's a smooth customer, and, I figure, a lot more dangerous."

Patton shot Herd a quick look. Brackett! That was the man he had been instrumental in chasing out of the other town—now Brackett was here! Yes, this life promised to be interesting.

They were alone when a single horseman rode up and dismounted leisurely. He was a man as big as Patton, and as handsome, with a wide and easy smile. Patton didn't need to be told that Brackett had arrived.

"How are you, Parson?" he nodded affably. "So we meet again! And I suppose one of us will have to get out of this town, eh?"

"What do you think, Brackett?" Herd asked.

"I think that I like it so well that I'm staying," Brackett said carelessly. "I came to give you just a word of friendly advice, parson. Kurtz, my partner here—he has direct ways, and is hard to control."

"That's up to you," Herd said shortly. "We're staying awhile."

THERE was a surprisingly big crowd, for the first evening. Patton realized a lot of them were merely curious, but they listened with enjoyment as he sang. But when Herd began to preach, even the singing was forgotten, and they drank it in hungrily. Herd was blunt, forthright, but his rugged exterior cloaked a passionate, burning eloquence.

The Markels were up near the front, Patton noted pleasurably. Mardie was eager, vivid. Everyone was listening tensely. Then, as the service went on, Patton noticed that there was an electric current of suspense in the air. Something was going to happen, and everyone seemed to know it, to be half-fearful, half-resentful. In the middle of the sermon, Patton heard it coming.

He'd heard such sounds before. Cowboys, yipping wildly, shooting guns in air. Then the sound came nearer, and for several minutes the yelling, whooping riders circled the tent at high speed, shooting into the air—several bullets cutting through the tent itself.

Herd paused, then, when the serenaders

finally withdrew, went on preaching as though nothing had happened. Afterward the Markels stopped to talk, but not for long.

"We have to get some sleep," Mardie explained. "Tom has to get up and milk six cows, and with turning ice cream freezers and so on, it keeps us busy. We—"

She stopped, with a sharply indrawn breath. Everyone else had gone, but two men were walking into the tent. One of them was Brackett. The other, Patton knew, must be Kurtz—big, broad and flabby, with shifty close-set eyes and a perpetual snarl on his face.

"You seemed to have a good crowd tonight, Parson," Brackett said easily. "And this new singer of yours was great. I was almost tempted to come and hear you myself tonight."

"Aw, cut out the baloney and get down to business," Kurtz growled.

"As I told you, Mr. Kurtz is of a forthright nature," Brackett smiled. "However, we did return, in a friendly spirit, to suggest once more that it would be well if you found some other town for your endeavors, parson. Since the Markels are among your supporters, a lot of people are associating your two causes. We'd gladly reimburse you for the expense of traveling—"

"You should know by this time that I can't be bluffed, Brackett," Herd said bluntly.

"Listen, hombre!" Kurtz growled. "Parsons don't mean a damn' thing to me! If you stay here any longer, there'll be trouble, an' plenty of it! That goes for you too, Markel. There's been others who tried to buck me, and them that didn't git, are still here—in Boothill!"

He turned, strode out again. Smiling and shaking his head, Brackett followed him. Mardie looked after them anxiously. Herd seemed unperturbed.

"Ah, well," Herd smiled. "You don't look like a man who would run easily, Tom. I think we'll keep on trusting the Lord."

THE NEXT evening there was an overflow crowd. Everyone knew that trouble impended, but Patton couldn't see that anybody was staying away on that account.

Herd was no man to dodge an issue. He plunged abruptly into the question upper-

most in everyone's mind, declaring that he had come there to preach, not to attack anyone. But when any crooked individual, no matter what his occupation, attacked him or any other honest man, it was time to fight back. He denounced Brackett and Kurtz, and declared that it was up to the people to support the Markels in their enterprise. Then he began his sermon.

He was scarcely well begun when the same sound came again—the cowboys, well fed on Kurtz' whiskey, from the sound. But tonight it wasn't just horseplay. There was a new, more threatening note in it. They swept up, circled the tent, half a hundred of them, then rode in through the open doorway, shooting, yelling, and swept clear around the tent, circling the benches. It reminded Patton of a circus parade, only this was grim business.

Half a dozen times they made the circle, coming dangerously close to the men, women and children crowded on the benches, rocking against the pulpit, bullets flying more and more indiscriminately. Someone screamed as they swept out. Herd jumped down from the platform, and Patton fol-

lowed one step behind him, his face white.

Tom Markel was stretched there, his head cradled in his sister's lap, stretched limp and bloody. One of those bullets hadn't gone wild.

IT WAS a nasty wound, not likely to be really serious, but it would lay Tom up for a couple of weeks.

"Guess they aimed to put me out of business, all right," he said. "That bullet wasn't an accident."

"No, it was no accident," Herd agreed grimly. "It was another warning. Next time they'll aim to kill us." His voice was quiet.

"Damn them," Patton growled. "I beg your pardon, parson, but that's the way I feel."

"Righteous anger has its place," Herd nodded. "What I'm worried about is Tom's business. It's too much for Miss Markel to handle—cows to milk, ice cream to freeze."

"I'll lend a hand," Patton said. "I used to milk cows as a kid, and I guess I haven't forgotten how. I can learn to work an ice-

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cream freezer. I only have to sing evenings, so it won't interfere."

"We'll leave it at that, then," Herd nodded. "Until the situation develops more fully."

"And that won't be long in coming, if I know anything about such fellows as we're dealing with," Patton said soberly, as they walked back to their van together. "The way I look at it, Herd, this was a sort of last warning tonight, shooting Tom. If you try to preach again tomorrow night, they know, as well as we do, that everybody will be watching. It will be showdown—and they'll try something worse."

"Likely they will," Herd nodded.

"Well—what do we do? It's all very well to trust in the Lord, but I seem to have heard somewhere that the Lord helps those who help themselves. And you aren't adverse to fighting back, I know. What do we do? I used to know how to use a gun, fairly well."

Herd shook his head.

"Fairly well would be suicidal, against that crew," he pointed out. "And I prefer fists to sixguns. Where did you learn to use a gun?"

"As a kid. I had an uncle who had been a cowboy. He taught me to use a gun and throw a rope."

"How good are you with a rope?"

Patton grinned.

"I may be rusty, but I think that, with a little practice, I could dab a loop over a running steer's horns, say three times out of four."

Herd nodded thoughtfully.

"Tomorrow, when you're taking the cricks out of your muscles after sessions with the freezer, you might practice up a bit," he suggested.

JUST what Herd had in mind, Patton didn't know, as evening approached again. There had been a lot of talk in town during the day, and it was no secret that tonight would be the showdown.

For himself, Patton was more tired than he had been for years. This ice cream business was no play.

Before the meeting opened, Herd quietly handed him a lariat, and he had another one, supple and ready, coiled on his own corner of the pulpit. There was an even bigger crowd tonight. Nothing happened

until the service was well along. Patton could guess why. It was harder to get recruits for the job of creating a disturbance, and it would take a lot more free whiskey to get them properly worked up. A lot of them had gotten disgusted, after the shooting of Markel. Having fun was one thing. Murder was something else.

But with the sermon at its climax, they heard the same sounds as on previous nights—the shooting and yelling cowboys, sweeping closer. Patton shrugged a little. Brackett and Kurtz weren't very original.

But they did have one new idea tonight. The riders swept straight inside the tent, and Brackett and Kurtz themselves were leading them. They started to make the circle, their horses crowding dangerously against the sides of the tent, in imminent danger of collapsing it.

As they drew close, Herd had quietly laid aside his book. Now he picked up his rope and began to twirl it, motioning to Patton to do the same. Then with bewildering speed, as the horses started to surge past, Herd's noose shot out and closed around Brackett's shoulders before he had any idea of what was going to happen. Heaving back on the rope with all the strength of his squat, powerful body, Herd jerked him completely out of the saddle.

Eyes sparkling, Patton was following Herd's example. Kurtz was half a length behind Brackett, and Patton's cast was lucky. A moment later, both horses were riderless, and the other cowboys, startled, none too enthusiastic to begin with, were taken aback at the fall of their leaders. They hastened to get back outside, then joined the crowding, tense onlookers.

For Herd was wasting no time. He had jerked the startled Brackett to his feet and held him there, a captive for all to see, and his voice rang above the din.

"Brackett," he said, "we've clashed before, but never as man to man. You have the reputation of being a fighter. So let's settle this, here and now. With fists. If I lick you, there's to be no more interference with these meetings, nor with Tom Markel and his business. If you win, I'll get out of town. How about it?"

Brackett looked a little dazed.

"That seems to be a sportsmanlike proposition, parson," he agreed. "I'm ready when you are."

Herd jerked the rope loose from his shoulders. But Kurtz, who had had the wind knocked out of him to begin with, cut in now.

"Mebbe that goes for you, Brackett," he growled, "but I ain't in on any such agreement."

"You won't need to feel cheated," Patton assured him. "I'm going to take you on—sort of a side-show to the main attraction. I'm going to give you the thrashing of your life. And when that's done, I'm going to boot you out of town. Beginning now!"

HE twitched the rope off Kurtz, and instantly Kurtz rushed him, lashing out with a treacherous kick. Patton, almost caught, jumped back, then met him as he came on. From then on, he had very little time for anything except slugging it out with as brutal and dirty a fighter as he had ever encountered. If he had felt cheated on that other night when he first met Herd, that lack was being abundantly made up to-night.

From the corner of his eye, Patton saw Herd, getting up from the ground and going grimly back to it. Then he was down himself, rolling to escape the impact of lunging boots as Kurtz tried to jump on him. He got up, cold rage taking the place of the anger that had driven him before. This time he measured his distance, ignored Kurtz' slapping right, and struck for the chin. Kurtz went down, rolled over half beneath a bench, and lay there.

His collar torn off, shirt half ripped from his back, one eye closed, Patton leaned back against the pulpit, panting. The other fight had been equally heated, but it was almost finished now as well. Herd and Brackett had worked back, almost to the entrance to the big tent, where the light of the moon made the scene nearly as vivid as at noon-day. Now Brackett made a last determined effort, there was a flurry of fists, and in the sudden painful hush, Patton saw that both of them were down, apparently knocked cold by each other's fists.

There was no doubt about Brackett, at least. He was limp and motionless. But Herd, bloody, dirty, scarcely recognizable as a minister of the gospel, was getting to his feet—unsteadily, but doing it.

In that moment a horse snorted—Brackett's riderless cayuse. Unnoticed in the excitement, it had cowered in the far end of the tent, behind the pulpit. Now, something had changed its passive terror to sudden wild panic. It came galloping toward the exit—Brackett right in its path!

Only one man was close enough to do anything about it. That was Herd, barely back on his own feet, legs still wobbly beneath him. But he moved swiftly, grabbed the limp form of Brackett, pulled—and a cry went up as the galloping cayuse surged past, and Herd was down again under those thrashing hoofs.

For a moment longer, as though held in a thrall, no one moved. He had managed to save his enemy, to pull him clear. But there was a bloody new cut on the side of his own head, where a shod hoof had struck a glancing blow.

Groggily, Herd got once more to his feet. Something like a sigh went up from the crowd. Then, unsteadily but determined, he tramped back to the platform, rested his hands on the pulpit. Patton, like the others, watched in awe and admiration. Here was a man—but he was first and last the preacher. He knew the psychological moment to preach his gospel, as well as he knew how to use his fists.

Gory and disheveled but strangely calm, he stood there, lifted his hand.

"The Lord is on the side of the right," he said with firm conviction. "Will those who want to get right with God, to be on His side, come forward now—come to the altar!"

Patton was aware that there would be a great response. But the congregation was still waiting, as if for something which was all a pattern of this night, a something which had to come first. Then Patton saw what it was.

So badly used up that he could not yet get to his feet, Brackett had rolled over, then to his hands and knees. Gone was the dapper, urbane gambler. He looked worse than Herd. But he was coming—crawling up the aisle on hands and knees at the preacher's invitation.

"Glory be!" Patton breathed, from a bruised and battered mouth which would scarcely form the words. "It's time for me to sing!"

RAIDERS OF EMPIRE

By Thomas G. Boggs

"Jim the Bold" Reynolds and his desperate, swift-riding crew made their do-or-die bid not merely for freedom to spend their golden loot—but for the entire State of Colorado. . . ! One of the strangest, most breath-taking adventures in all the colorful pages of Western history!

ONE of the most daring exploits in the history of the old West was the attempt of John and "Jim the Bold" Reynolds to invade and take over the State of Colorado in the early '60's. And, strangely, they might have succeeded, had it not been for over-confidence too freely expressed.

During the Civil War, the Union authorities in Colorado arrested the Reynolds brothers and imprisoned them in the compound at Denver, along with other Southern sympathizers. The brothers had worked in California Gulch and other camps during the early boom days, but little was known about them. Their arrest, however, brought them into contact with such other

notorious prisoners as Charlie Harrison and Captain McKee, and soon they were to embark together on a long career of raiding, robbery and violence.

The Reynolds brothers, with McKee, Harrison and a few others, managed to escape and flee to Texas. Here, McKee organized a band of irregulars which operated over a wide territory in the coming months. John and Jim Reynolds joined them and learned their trade well. So well, in fact, that they wanted to branch out for themselves. On this subject Jim Reynolds approached McKee, now calling himself Colonel:

"Colonel," he said, "we've been doin'



Soon they embarked on a long career of raiding, robbery and violence. . . .

right well, but I've got an idea: Why not let me and John organize a band and head into Colorado? We're familiar with most o' that country. We could clean up. Besides, I'd like the pleasure of lootin' that damn Denver town like Quantrell did Lawrence."

McKee eyed him sharply.

"O' course, Colonel," Reynolds hastened to add, "we could arrange to meet after a while and divide up."

"I have a better idea," Colonel McKee countered. "You can have some of my men to begin with and pick up volunteers on the way. Soon I'll have to move and will follow you into Colorado, where we will join forces and take over that State."

With a gang of twenty to thirty, Captain Jim and his brother John cut across country to the Santa Fe trail. Here they came upon a large wagon train which they attacked and looted of some forty thousand dollars.

Later, when the men found the money was not to be divided, but to be used, as Captain Jim Reynolds said, to better equip the company, many of the renegades deserted. The brothers, however, and the rest continued northward, hoping to pick up recruits among the miners with Southern sympathies. En route, the brothers cached the forty thousand dollars in an old prospect hole in the Spanish Peaks. Then they all rode up the Arkansas, crossed into South Park, gathering recruits along the way, till they reached California Gulch.

Before entering the Gulch they split up in small parties so as to avoid suspicion. But their arrival at the once-rich California Gulch proved a disappointment. It was by this time like a burned-out candle. So they turned back into South Park, where they robbed the Buckskin Joe stage of ten thousand dollars.

Here it was that, too, the Reynolds brothers displayed a trait which ultimately was to be their downfall. Unlike most bandits of the time, they didn't kill the stage driver, Abe Williamson, but let him go. Also, their initial luck in the game of robbery now caused them to make another mistake, which was to constitute the narrow margin by which Colorado escaped disaster. They commenced to brag.

They were, they said, merely the vanguard of an army coming to take over the State. This statement, emphasized by their

further looting, spread rapidly across Colorado with the result that communities became armed camps, preparing to meet the invading army of irregulars.

Not suspecting these preparations nor the terror their boasting inspired, the Reynolds gang continued their career of looting and pillaging. But strangely for such a murderous crew, they sometimes seemed to show extraordinary consideration for their victims.

It is said that they were saved from complete annihilation on one occasion by a rancher whom they had already robbed of everything he owned. This rancher pleaded that his family would starve if they were left without anything. So the Reynolds brothers returned his property. Whereupon he told them of a large posse close upon their trail.

THE gang fled to the high timbered land and across onto the Platte River, where, in a secluded spot near the mouth of Geneva Creek, they made camp. Here, the Reynolds brothers left the others for a second time to plant their loot, this time principally the Buckskin Joe stage ten thousand dollars.

A short time after they returned to camp a shot rang out and one of the bandits fell forward against the fire. The others fled to the hills and so escaped being wiped out by a party of miners. The miners took the dead bandit's head to Fairplay, where for days it was exposed on a pole.

But the fleeing renegades—excepting John Reynolds and one Stowe—were eventually captured and taken to Denver—where they were tried and handed over to Colonel Chivington of the Third Cavalry for transport to Fort Lyons. Unfortunately for the prisoners, they were delivered into the hands of Sergeant Abe Williamson, the same driver whom they had spared when looting and burning the Buckskin Joe stage.

William, however, bore no fondness for the crew, and he made up his mind that the outlaws would never reach Fort Lyons. Accordingly, for two days he gave them every chance to escape. But his prisoners realized that any such move would mean instant death. Finally, when it became apparent that they would not attempt to escape, Williamson and another sergeant

(Please turn to page 96)



"Be—be almighty careful!" Henry stuttered.

RETURN of THE BOOTHILL GUNMAN

By Thomas Thompson

Henry Hampton, son of a great fighting man, knew he'd never be the gun-slinger his father had been. . . . But in that red night of violence and terror, he proved that Slim O'Daniel's roaring Colt could not be stilled—until the last back-shooting killer rode no more in the dark of the moon. . . .

HENRY HAMPTON went into a low crouch as he drew his gun. It wasn't a fast draw, but it was smooth and the hammer came back as the gun left the holster. He stood there, weighing the gun in his small, thick hand. Light from the kerosene lamp on the wall played up and down the blued barrel.

Henry straightened and dropped the gun back in its holster. He ran his hand through his sparse hair and sighed. Unbuckling the belt, he put the gun and holster back on the shelf along with the other miscellaneous hardware. It was getting late. Time to lock

up. Mrs. Hampton would be waiting supper.

He grinned sheepishly to himself before blowing out the lamp and fishing his keys out of his pocket. Out of all the weapons he had sold over the counter, this particular one had attached itself to him. That gun, the slim, deadly weapon that Slim O'Daniel had once owned, was part of a dream. When he belted it on he became another man—a man he knew he could have been if fate had wanted it that way. But fate had decided on a different role for him from the one it had picked for his gun-fighting sire. Henry was a merchant—respected, but not to successful. No one here knew that the famous outlaw had been his father. He knew people would laugh at him if he started carrying a gun—even in this roaring cattle town of Alturas.

Henry removed his black sleeve-guards, sat a derby carefully on his head and blew out the last lamp. Keys in hand, he started across toward the front door. The three men met him there. They wore masks—almost hoods, so completely did the black cloth cover their faces. Their dusty hats were pulled low and the guns in their hands were steady.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" Henry Hampton said, keeping his voice level. He thought of that gun, there behind the counter.

"You sure as hell can," one man growled. "Get back inside."

"There's hardly no cash in the drawer," Henry said, backing away, his hands high. "I had a very slow day. It's been slow lately."

"Shut up," the outlaw snapped. "We don't want your money."

"But I haven't—"

"Get back in that storeroom."

Henry Hampton obeyed. There was nothing else to do. The three men pressed in on him in the darkness. Henry's breath whistled in his throat. When he tried to speak, he could make only dry rasping sounds.

"Close the door and light that lamp," the leader said.

Henry fumbled with the lamp. Vaguely he thought it strange that these men would know there was a lamp in the storeroom. The yellow light chased the shadows into the dark corners and Henry felt better with

the darkness gone. He backed up against the wall. It was good having something solid against his back.

"It's stacked there in the corner," the leader said, nodding his head on his thick, short neck. "Put it in that gunnysack." The other two holstered their guns and started taking down the square boxes piled in the corner.

"But that's Mr. Harrison's dynamite," Henry said protestingly. "He had me order it for him. He was going to blow some stumps. He's already paid me for it—"

"Shut up or I'll rake this gun-barrel across your skull," the leader snapped. "Hurry up, you two," he said to the other two. "I don't want to stay here all night."

"How much we want?" one man asked.

"Take twenty or thirty sticks," the boss said. "We might want to go in the stump-blasting business." The men laughed dutifully. The leader turned to Henry. "Where you keep the fuse and caps, Skinny?"

"In front—under the counter," Henry said. He tried to place that voice. Someone had called him "Skinny" once before. He remembered he hadn't liked it. Was it Hank Cutler?

"You boys ready?"

"All set," the men said.

"Get up there and show us the other stuff, Skinny," the leader said. "Hurry up!"

HENRY hurried up to the front of the store. "The fuse is here," he said, pulling on a length of the white cord-like stuff that was sticking through a hole in the counter. "Just pull. It unrolls as you pull. I made the reel myself."

"Five or six feet's enough," the leader cut in. "Caps?"

"Down at the other end of the lower shelf," Henry directed. "I'll get them—"

"How you boys fixed for guns?" the boss asked. "He's got some here."

"Always use an extra hogleg," one man admitted. "Find any shells?"

"He keeps them in a drawer—right there behind you," the third masked man directed.

Henry heard his ammunition drawer being pulled open. He tried desperately to place the voices of the men, but couldn't. Lots of people came to his store. Plenty of them know where that big ammunition drawer was. He gave it up. They could be any of a hundred men he knew casually.

"There's a gun here on the shelf with a holster—feels like a good one." It was the boss speaking. Henry's blood chilled. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, and his voice trembled when he spoke.

"That's my gun," he said. "I wish you wouldn't take my gun—"

"Something special, eh?" the boss said. "Imagine Skinny here with a gun!" The three men guffawed.

"It's no good," Henry said. "It's—well, it's more like a keepsake. You wouldn't want it." He heard the metallic click as the hammer came back and the sharp snap as it fell on an empty chamber. Henry had never loaded the gun.

"What do yuh mean, no good?" the boss said. "I don't need any light to tell me a good gun when I feel one. Think I'll keep this one myself."

"No!" Henry protested.

"Shut up," the leader said. Henry heard the creak of new leather as the boss buckled on the gun. Henry knew that sound. He had heard it many times there in the seclusion of the storeroom. "Come on," the boss said. "Let's go."

"Ain't you gonna do nothing to fuddy-duddy?" one of the men asked.

"'Course not," the boss said. "That's the trouble with you. You never use your head. Suppose we have to wait? You want the whole town stirred up over this monkey?"

"What if he talks?"

"Are you crazy?" the boss scoffed. "Henry won't talk, will you, Henry?"

"I'm not saying," Henry said backing against the wall. The boss grabbed the storekeeper by the throat and held him close.

"Get this, Henry. You don't know us, but we sure as hell know you. You wouldn't like that little white house of yours to catch fire accidental-like, would you? Would you like something to happen to your wife, maybe?"

"No," Henry admitted, fighting for his breath. "I wouldn't like that."

"You gonna do any talking, Henry?"

"No," Henry said weakly. "I won't talk." It wasn't what he wanted to say, but somehow he couldn't say anything else. Physical violence was something new to him. He felt every muscle in his body quivering.

The boss released his grip. "Go straight

home, Henry," he said. "We'll be watching to see you get there."

Henry rubbed his bruised throat. "I'll go straight home," he said.

The three masked men left the store, taking the sack with their loot with them. As they stepped out onto the dimly-lit street Henry saw his pet gun strapped around the middle of the biggest man.

Henry locked the store and walked home. There was a prickly sensation along the middle of his back. The little man clenched and unclenched his hands.

THREE nights is a long time to go without sleep—especially when a man keeps long hours, opening the store at eight and closing at seven. Henry Hampton looked through the window into the glare of the street. His eyes smarted. He jumped when the door opened and Pete Harrison came in.

"Hello there, Henry," the big rancher greeted jovially. "Got that dynamite of mine yet?"

"Dynamite?" Henry said.

"Yeah, dynamite. You know—boom, boom! To blow stumps. Say, what's the matter with you? Ain't you feeling well?"

Henry laughed weakly. "I was thinking about something else, I guess," he said. "Silly, isn't it? Dynamite. Of course. I ordered it. It'll be on the next load Jake Moxley brings in."

"I was just talking to Jake and he said he brought a bunch of powder to you the last trip in," Harrison said. "Wasn't that mine?"

"What?" Henry said. "Oh—that. That was for the Clarkson boys over at the Molockiny Mine. They're going to do some blasting over there."

"I thought they were going to placer," Harrison said, staring intently at the hardware man.

"They changed their mind," Henry said. "Decided to do some hardrock mining, I guess. Your dynamite will be in on the next wagon."

"Don't make any difference," Harrison said with a shrug. "I just thought the stuff Jake brought in was my own load. I had the wagon in town so I was gonna pick it up. Sure it'll be in on the next load?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Henry said. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Harrison said, "I'll see you next week, then," and left. Henry sat down on an empty box. His hands were trembling. He knew that Harrison had suspected something. The door opened and Clint Raymond and Howard Cooper poked their heads in.

"Hey, Crow-bait, we're going down to the bank," Cooper said. "Want us to take your million along?"

Henry smiled. He liked Cooper—even liked to have Cooper call him "Crow-bait." Cooper had been calling him that for a long time. Cooper and Raymond were his business neighbors and friends. When he had first started the hardware store, Cooper's feed business was already well established. Cooper's goodnatured joshing had made those first years easier. Raymond, in his quiet way, had made things easier too. They had both loaned Henry money that first

HE PUSHED the thoughts out of his mind and thought about his bank balance. It was low. He'd take the money in the cash drawer to replace Harrison's dynamite. . . He dropped the ledger he was studying and stood there, eyes wide. There was a dull, booming roar echoing up from down the street. Then curses—the sound of horses—pistol shots.

Henry ran out on the boardwalk and stared toward the corner. Two men ran out of the bank and mounted horses. They galloped up the street, right past Henry's store. They wore black masks. One was tying heavy bags behind his saddle while the other covered him with gunfire. Men in the street were firing wildly at the fleeing horsemen. Then the crowd was running toward the corner and Henry went with them.

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winter when things were so slack. It was a comfortable feeling, having these men on either side of him.

"Guess I got too much money for you two old men to pack," Henry said. "I'm not going to make a deposit today."

"Getting uppity now that you're a big success, eh?" Cooper taunted. "Don't want us to see your bank balance. Better watch out—we'll be borrowing from you!"

Henry laughed. That was a good joke. For a second he felt warm inside, then Raymond and Cooper left and he felt alone again. He felt more miserable now than he had before. Why hadn't he called Raymond and Cooper in and told them about the robbery? Why hadn't he told Harrison? He tried to think that it was because of the danger to his wife, his home. But always deep inside a voice said, "Henry Hampton, you're afraid. You felt big back there in the storeroom with an empty gun around your middle. Now you're up against live guns, and you're afraid." He felt that his father would have disowned him if he were still alive.

He stood in the doorway of the bank and ran his tongue across his dry lips. Clint Raymond and Howard Cooper were sprawled on the floor. There was blood seeping from the corner of Cooper's big, friendly mouth.

"Blew the whole safe apart," he heard dimly. "Must have used a lot of powder!"

"Cooper and Raymond didn't have a chance," someone complained. "They got Vince Crandall, too." Henry thought about Vince Crandall, the teller. He was such a harmless little gent. It seemed wrong.

"Must have known the sheriff was out of town—"

Henry turned and walked slowly back up the street. Desperately he wished that he had gone to the sheriff about the robbery. Maybe it wouldn't have done any good, but it might have. Maybe Raymond and Cooper and Crandall would still be alive. There was a dull pain around his heart.

He entered his store and started fumbling aimlessly with the disordered papers on his desk. His black ledger sprawled open where he had dropped it. He leafed through

the pages and saw an entry . . . "Howard Cooper—\$400.00." Another read "Clint Raymond—\$500.00." Both accounts were balanced out. A ledger had to balance. Yes, he thought, it had to balance. He took his hat from the peg by the door and locked the store for the day.

HENRY had never liked funerals. This one was worse than usual. It was hot and stuffy in the little church, and it was crowded. Cooper and Raymond and Crandall had been popular men. The three coffins were piled high with flowers. Henry tried to pick out the roses and snap-dragons that his wife had sent.

Three days now. . . The sheriff had come back to take up a cold trail. People were starting to complain—all but Henry. It wasn't the sheriff's job to find the killers of these men, Henry told himself. It was his, and somehow, someday—

The preacher stopped talking and people left their seats and began filing by the coffins. Henry slipped outside into the sunshine. Across the street Hank Cutler was tying a blanket roll behind his saddle.

Henry saw Cutler drop a gunbelt into a saddle bag. He closed his eyes and tried to picture a black mask under that dusty gray hat. He tried to remember how the masked man's voice had sounded. Henry walked across the street.

"Hello, Mr. Cutler," Henry said.

Cutler tied one more knot in his saddle strings before answering. "Hi, Henry," he said.

Henry's mouth was dry. "Going some place?" he asked.

Hank Cutler looked at him closely. "Maybe," he said. "Why?"

"No reason," Henry said. "I just noticed that blanket roll. Figured maybe you was leaving. No offense—"

Hank Cutler laughed. "Got a job making bangtails out of broomtails," he said. "Be gone a month or so."

"That's fine," Henry said. "I didn't know you broke horses."

"Better than punchin' cows," Cutler said, tossing a stirrup up.

"Suppose it is, if a man likes it," Henry said. He was working around close to the horse, patting the animal's rump and toying with the buckle on the saddle bag. "Go to the funeral?"

"Yeah," Cutler said. "Can't stay for the burying." He dropped the stirrup and moved up to the horse's head. Henry unbuckled the saddle bag and let his hand drop inside. His movements were hidden by his body. His fingers touched a bottle and a gunbelt. He withdrew his hand as if his fingers had been burned and stepped aside. Cutler threw the reins over the pony's head and mounted. "So long, Henry," he said. "I'll be seeing you."

"So long," Henry said. He stood there, trembling, as Hank Cutler jogged down the street. Then, turning, quickly, he mounted the first cowpony at the hitching rail in front of the Ox Yoke Saloon. Bouncing ungracefully, he started down the street, keeping well back but following Hank Cutler. "You'll be seeing me," he said to himself.

HANK CUTLER made camp that night in a cove on the banks of the Muddy. Henry Hampton lay flat on his stomach on a rock a quarter of a mile away and watched. He felt certain Cutler was his man, but he couldn't be sure. If he could only see that gun in the saddle bag—then he would know.

Cutler's fire was dying down. Henry climbed off the rock, took the Winchester from the scabbard on his saddle and started inching his way down the slope.

The carpet of pine-needles made the going easy. He could move without making a sound. He was not over fifteen feet away from Cutler when he stopped in the cedar thicket and squatted down, sitting on his heels. After a long time he crawled forward and made his way to Cutler's saddle. Silently he opened the saddle bag and hauled out the gun and belt that were there. Once he had the weapon in his hand, he was sure.

Cutler muttered and turned in his sleep. Panic gripped Henry Hampton. His first reaction was that he was being caught stealing. Without thinking, he shoved the gun back into the saddle bag and crawled into the night.

Back at his own camp, he cursed himself. Then he changed his mind. Three of his friends had died—three must pay. He was glad then that he hadn't taken the gun. Cutler would lead him to the other two gunmen.

He dozed once or twice that night, but mostly he stirred around, listening to the sounds of the night. He was walking back and forth, swinging his arms to keep warm, when the sun spilled orange darts across the blanket or river fog in the canyon below. Henry climbed back on his rock perch and watched while the fog floated off ahead of the sunlight. Hank Cutler had finished eating and was saddling his horse.

Henry caught up the cowpony and mounted. The animal kicked his heels and gave an early-morning squeal. Henry grabbed the saddle horn with both hands. The pony lowered his head and started cropping grass.

Henry pulled the animal's head up. The pony side-stepped and pitched awkwardly. Henry gave the animal an open-hand slap alongside the head. The pony snorted and raised his heels in a half-hearted attempt to unseat his rider. Then he wheeled around and headed toward Alturas. Henry gave him another slap and reined him around hard.

The pony balked, but Henry kicked him and sent him forward. The animal obeyed, and Henry felt good. He was the boss now; he could feel it. He reined up and waited until Hank Cutler mounted and started up the river. Then he began angling down the pine slope toward the bottom of the narrowing canyon.

There was no fear in him now—just the uneasy buck-fever of a hunter after big game. He reached down and touched the stock of the rifle. It felt good. It was even good for a man to be hungry. Henry spat over his chin and gigged the bronc into a faster walk.

IT WAS blue dusk when Henry came to the entrance of the small rock-walled valley. Gnats hovered in smoky clouds and insects skimmed the surface of the dark pool at the foot of the rapids. Bluejays called to each other in the cedar thicket. Across the meadow, crouched against a natural granite back-drop, was a log cabin. Smoke spiraled from the stone chimney and lay in straight wisps over the meadow, waiting for the breeze to give it life. Three horses stood hip-shot in the pole corral, swishing idly at the gnats.

Henry dismounted, unsaddled the pony and sent him back down the canyon with a

slap on the rump. He couldn't risk the horse giving away his position. If he rode out of this valley at all, he would have three horses to choose from. If he didn't . . . He gripped the rifle and started working his way around the valley in the direction of the cabin.

He was near the log house when he saw the spring. There was a bucket and a tin dipper hanging on a nail driven into the smooth bark of an alder. His thirst and hunger suddenly became all-important. A dipper of cold spring water seemed the most desirable thing in the world.

He looked through the cabin window. He could see the three men, sitting at a table. Hank Cutler was facing the window. The other two had their backs to him. Crouching low, he ran to the spring and eagerly scooped a dipperful of the cold, clear water.

The door of the cabin creaked open and a man stood there, a bucket in his hand. Henry recognized him as Buck Wallen, a sidekick of Cutler's. Wallen pushed the door closed and started toward the spring. Henry stepped behind the alder. His hand closed over a three-foot length of wood.

He held his breath until his lungs begged for air. Buck Wallen stopped, lit a cigarette and then came on, swinging the bucket. Henry raised his club.

He waited until Buck was on one knee, dipping water from the spring. Then he swung the club with both hands. There was a spongy, cracking feeling when the club hit the back of Wallen's head. He didn't make a sound as he slid forward, his face in the spring. Henry laid the club down. His hands were shaking. He closed his eyes for a minute and swayed dizzily. Then he said, "That's one for Vince Crandall," and he felt better. He didn't look at the body as he went back to the natural rock hideout he had spotted above the cabin.

Sitting there, his back against a rock, he felt sick. A shaft of yellow light spilled across the yard and Hank Cutler's voice called, "Hey, Buck! Come on with that water!"

Henry leaned forward over the rock and saw Hank come out of the cabin, walk behind long-legged shadows across the fan of light and head for the spring. In a little while he saw a match flare and go out. There was no sound. When Cutler ap-

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by Lee Floren



Together they were herded
toward the bandits. . . .

A thin white trail led Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones into the heart of the Border Badlands, where a Mexican bandit leader waited to offer them a strange choice: "Join me in laying waste both your country and mine—or die!"

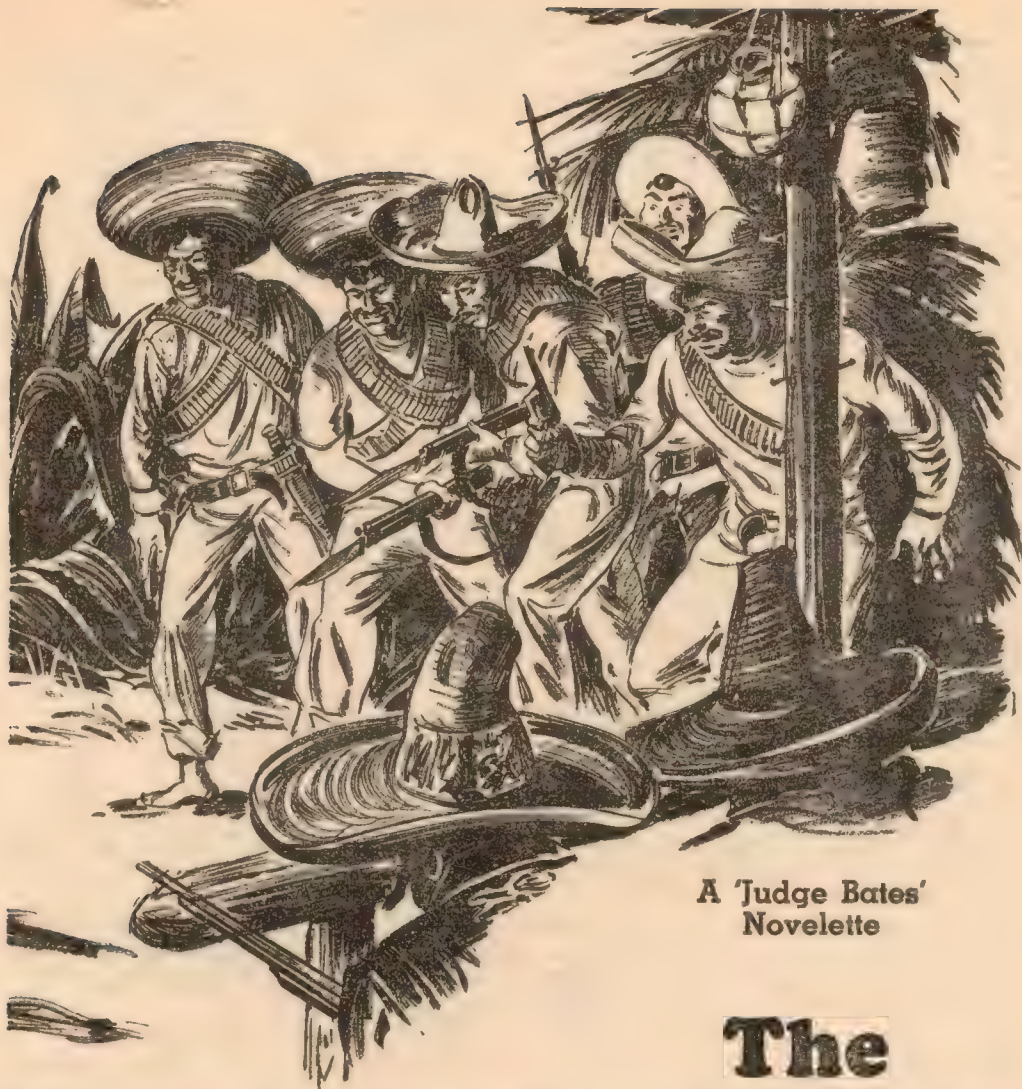
CHAPTER ONE

Life or Death?

JUDGE LEMANUEL BATES thought he was dreaming. But as the rap of of knuckles grew against his door, he came out of sleep into reality. Coupled with that impatient rap was the raised voice of his partner, Tobacco Jones.

"What you want, Tobacco?"

"Johnny Douglas is shot, Judge! Night raiders hit his herd. Doc Stevens is takin' care of Johnny now."



A 'Judge Bates'
Novelette

The Whiskey-Jug Rebellion

Judge Bates waddled to the door, ludicrous in his long, flowing nightgown. He lit the kerosene lamp and saw that Tobacco Jones' homely face was flushed with anger and excitement.

"Talk fast, Tobacco."

Tobacco Jones bit off a fresh chew. While the Judge dressed, the lanky man talked. T Down riders had been holding the beef-herd on Wisdom Creek. Out of the night had come hard-riding buckaroos who scattered the herd. And in the gun-

fracas, young Johnny Douglas, T Down owner, had stopped lead.

"Is the kid hurt bad?"

"Doc Stevens was just startin' to make his examination when I left to get you. They're at the hotel."

Judge Bates dug under his bed, came out with a gallon whiskey jug. He crooked the jug on his elbow and drank deeply. He took his sawed-off shotgun from the wall. Then, with Tobacco Jones following, he hurried through the night.

Mixed emotions tugged at the fat man. Here on the Mexican Border the stars hung across the blue night sky, but the heavy juror had no eye for celestial beauty. Fear for Johnny Douglas gnawed at the Judge's thoughts.

In response to Johnny's request, the Judge and Tobacco had taken a short vacation and left Cowtrail, their Wyoming stamping-grounds, and gone to the New Mexican border, where Johnny ran the T Down. The T Down had been losing cattle. T Down punchers had been picked from saddles, victims of ambush guns. Johnny's father, old Hank Douglas, had ridden with the Judge and Tobacco years before. Now old Hank was dead; had been, in fact, for ten years. And Johnny had inherited the T Down. By hard work, he had built it up—but the last three years—

"Damn' bushwhackers!" growled Judge Bates.

Johnny lay on a cot in the hotel lobby. Two of his punchers, suffering from minor wounds, were being questioned by the sheriff, a homely, squat man. Two deputies were at the doorway, keeping the townsfolk back, while the medico worked on Johnny. The gangling deputy barred Judge Bates' way.

"You can't come in here," he said testily. "Sheriff Jorgenson's orders."

"I'm Judge Lemanuel Bates," said the judge. "This is my partner, Tobacco Jones. Johnny Douglas is almost like a son to us."

"You don't say," said the deputy. "How touchin'! Well, an order's an order, gents. Sorry—"

The Judge's jowls flushed. His huge fist went out, grabbed the deputy by his buckskin jacket. The man grunted, cursed, went for his gun. But Tobacco Jones, moving in, had the gun before the deputy could draw. Grunting, Judge Bates jerked the man forward, threw him bodily into the street. He hit the sidewalk and sat there, cursing loudly. Quickly, the judge turned, faced the other deputy. But Tobacco Jones already had the Colt in that worthy's ribs. The lanky man shifted his cud.

"Okay to go in?"

The deputy stared at the .45. "Okay with me." His voice was small.

The sheriff barged to the door. "What in Tophet's goin' on—?" He stared at the gun, at the fallen deputy, at Tobacco and the judge. "What you two gents up to?"

"Nobody's standin' in my way, Jorgenson," said Judge Bates. "You oughtta teach that deputy to have a civil tongue."

The sheriff mumbled, "Sorry, Bates. But he didn't know you two gents. You only been in town for a coupla days an' he probably never got to meet you." His voice lowered. "That man ain't got sense enough to drive a picket-pin in a snow-bank."

"Why don't you get somebody with brains?"

"Say that again—" The lawman groaned. "Every man that's got any guts an' gump-tion's over across the Border, chasin' Mexican bandits at so much a head. The salary I can pay ain't much compared with the fightin' wages they can get—"

THE Judge wasn't listening. He was kneeling beside Johnny. The youth's tanned face was drained of blood. Bates looked at the medico.

"What you say, Doc?"

The dark man shrugged. "A bullet in his shoulder, another through his lower belly. Both wounds are clean—I've taken the bullets out. He's under anaesthetic, now, but I give him a good chance. He'll make it barring unexpected complications."

"Pull him through," said the Judge, "and I'll triple your fee."

"I'll do my best," replied the doctor.

Judge Bates got to his feet. He stood there, shotgun under his arm, whiskey-jug dangling from one fat finger. A string-bean of a man, Tobacco Jones also stood silent, chewing methodically. One thought played through the Judge: that afternoon he and Tobacco had ridden to the T Down holding-grounds, and Johnny had kidded and joked and drunk with him—and now Johnny was close to death. . . .

A girl brushed past the deputy and ran to Johnny's bed. She knelt beside him and put her head beside his on the pillow. Judge Bates saw sobs shake her shoulders. Sympathy ran through him as he put his hand on her silken dark hair. She lifted dark, deep eyes, tear-rimmed.

"Will he—?"

"He'll live," the jurist assured.

Relief flared across her pretty face. "Oh— thank heavens—" She got to her feet. "Who shot him, Judge?"

"Night riders!"

"Did they get the herd?"

One of the wounded T Down punchers answered. "Never got much of it, the way I figure. Maybe about four, five hundred head. Hard to tell in the dark, though, ma'am."

"You recognize any of the riders?" asked the judge.

The man shook his head. "Night was too dang dark—that was before the stars was clear. Most of them wore big hats, looked like Mexicans. Prob'ly them danged Border raiders of Juan Martinez."

Judge Bates had heard of Juan Martinez, the bandit. The offspring of an Apache squaw and a renegade *Americano*, he had built up a bandit gang that preyed on either side of the border. The judge glanced inquiringly at Tobacco Jones.

"Let's ride out to the herd," said Tobacco, "an' trail from there."

"Just as soon as I get my jug refilled."

Now a big man pushed past the deputies. Thick-set, he wore a beaded buckskin jacket. Dust-coated pants were crammed into the tops of his Justin boots. It was Tal LeBaron, owner of the Circle Y.

"What happened?" he demanded gruffly.

Anger crept through Judge Bates. The roughness of LeBaron's direct question somehow angered the judge. He didn't answer.

"You're Judge Bates, ain't you?" asked LeBaron.

Judge Bates nodded.

"Heard you was in this country. What happened to Johnny?"

"You got eyes, ain't you?" Judge Bates' tone was hard. "You can see he got shot, can't you?"

LeBaron studied him, eyes lidded. "You got a sharp tongue, Bates," he said roughly. "Someday somebody'll trim it for you."

"I'm well into the years," assured the judge, "an' to this date nobody's trimmed it, like you say. You ask a lot of questions, LeBaron—"

LeBaron licked wind-cracked lips. "Johnny Douglas's my nearest neighbor. I got a right to ask questions, ain't I, about my neighbor? Free country, ain't it?"

"Tis until you tromp on somebody's

spurs," said the Judge. "Johnny told me about you, LeBaron. Pointed you out to me a few days back. You an' him don't cotton much t' one another? That correct?"

"We've had some differences, yes. But most neighbors now and then are bound to differ."

"Seems to me," said the Judge, "that Johnny said you wanted his springs— Wishbone Springs, I believe he called them. I mind now that he said he might have to sell the springs to you if he lost any more cattle."

Tal LeBaron's eyes were probing marbles. "What's this leadin' up to, Bates?"

"Just this. If Johnny was awake, I don't think he'd want you around—"

Katherine Douglas said, "He's right, LeBaron. Neither Johnny or I need your company now—or any other time."

LeBaron's heavy jaws flushed. "Can't a man drop in to see how his wounded neighbor is—"

"Get a-movin'!" growled Judge Bates.

"Nobody's orderin' me—" said LeBaron.

JUDGE BATES' temper broke. "I'm orderin' you! An' what's more, you're doin' as I say! Now get out an' stay out!"

LeBaron moved closer. His voice was low. "Bates, I'll take you apart! I'll—" He never finished the sentence. Judge Bates' knuckles saw to that. But the big man was fast. Even before Judge Bates' first landed, Tal LeBaron had flung out a wild right hand.

The blow hit Judge Bates on the mouth. The juror felt the salty taste of blood. His own fist crashed then against LeBaron's jaw, turning the man's head on its thick neck, staggering him.

Grunting, Judge Bates went to work. Despite his fatness, the judge was fast. But his wind was short. Whiskey and lack of physical work had cut down his endurance.

LeBaron circled him, head pulled low. His eyes were shiny beads back of his heavy brows. Judge Bates stood there, watching the man. Tobacco Jones leaned against the wall, seemingly undisturbed, but his hand was on his gun. Sheriff Jorgenson was shouting for order.

"Stand back, Sheriff," said Tobacco.

"But Jones—"

"The Judge can take care of hisself." The lanky man bit off a chew. "Quite a set-to, huh?"

LeBaron moved in. Judge Bates hit him hard, drove him back. For one brief second LeBaron's jaw was back. The judge hit him twice square on the point of it. LeBaron grunted and went down.

Judge Bates stepped back, panting. Tobacco tossed him his neckscarf; the juror dabbed his split lips. LeBaron sat there, spitting blood. Finally he gathered his heavy legs under him and heaved himself to his feet.

"There'll be more of this, Bates," he growled.

The Judge nodded. "I'll be around town for some time," he promised.

Tal LeBaron turned and walked out. Judge Bates stood in the doorway and watched him go. LeBaron's horse, he noticed, was marked by streaks of dried sweat. He mulled that fact over for a while. Then, with his lanky partner beside him, he stepped into the night.

They went as far as the saloon across the street. The judge laid his jug on the bar. "Fill 'er up."

"I better get some eatin' tobaccer," said Tobacco Jones.

The Judge paid. "This LeBaron feller keeps late hours," he murmured to the whiteapron. "Here it is, almost three o'clock an' he was in here with you."

"He wasn't in here," said the bartender. "Me, I don't like that big son."

Judge Bates' brows rose. "Maybe then he was in some other saloon?"

"Nope. All t' others closed. I was closed myself. Jes' opened up to accommodate anybody who'd got outa bed due to the excitement."

The Judge drank. "Mighty fine likker," he acknowledged.

Outside they met the doctor and the proprietor of the general merchandise store. "Johnny come to yet?" asked the Judge anxiously.

"He'll come out of it soon," the medico assured. "I have to get hold of some bandages. I need some gauze."

The doctor and the shop-owner went into the store. Judge Bates hurried toward the livery barn. The hostler, a stoop-shouldered graybeard, was sleeping in a manger. The Judge shook him awake.

"We need two saddle horses and rigs," he said.

FIVE MINUTES later, he and Tobacco were riding under the stars. Tobacco's long, homely face held a heavy frown.

"This LeBaron gent," said Judge Bates, "is no honest rancher. No honest man rides abroad at three in the mornin'. Did you mind his horse, Tobacco? That critter'd been rid hard an' long. Mind how he was marked by dry sweat an' dust?"

"He'd pounded the trail," admitted Tobacco Jones. "Me, I ain't no good at this mental 'rithmetic. You say it, Judge."

"LeBaron's workin' with Juan Martinez. This Martinez gent is supplyin' beef to Pancho Villa. An army, even if it is a scraggly bunch like Villa's, has to have beef to chaw on. Martinez an' LeBaron, unless I'm ridin' the wrong horse, is supplyin' that beef—out of Johnny's herds."

Tobacco Jones frowned and waited.

"The way it 'pears to me, LeBaron rode with Martinez an' his raiders when they busted up Johnny's herd. Mebbeso LeBaron's been watchin' the herd an' when the time was ripe he gave the signal. Then LeBaron swings into town to see if Johnny had got killed. That's why I called his hand back there."

"Where we goin' now, Judge?"

"Out to the herd."

The moon was low when they reached the spot where the herd had been held. The cattle had run north, and in that direction they could see T Down punchers gathering the remnants. The riders were dark dots moving in the shimmering distance. This was a rough, cut-coulee country that petered out and became a desert to the south. Through the desert angled the river with its marshlands.

The sharp angles of hoofs marked the sandy soil. The Judge circled the grounds, looking for tracks leading to the south. Finally he found them and read the story there on the ground. The raiders had cut out about three hundred head of T Down cattle and started them toward the Border.

They followed the trail through the hills. When dawn was sprinkling the sky, they came to the rim of the desert. Ocotillo and chamiso and barrel cacti dotted the barren expanse of sand. The serenity of the land was broken by the upthrusting limbs of

spidery Joshua trees. And here they lost the trail.

Sometime during the night the wind had swept down from the hills; sand had grated across sand and hidden the spoor of the herd. Judge Bates tilted his jug, the fiery whiskey gurgling down his leathery throat. He wiped his mouth, tied his jug to his saddle.

"The desert," he said, "hides its secrets well." He lifted his eyes to Mexico and the rough hills that were dim with distance. "Look at it, Tobacco, sleeping in strong simplicity. The poetry in a man's soul should rise to a scene such as this. Sand and secrets—"

"And Johnny, too, layin' back there shot up," reminded Tobacco Jones.

Judge Bates scowled. "The desert took the play out of our hands. Yonder by the river maybe we can pick up tracks again."

CHAPTER TWO

Trail of Terror

THEY rode forward into the ocotillo. Judge Bates rode slumped, ponderous body deep in saddle. The desert dust came up and rimmed his baggy blue suit. Tobacco Jones sat askew in his saddle, his lean jaws working. Suddenly the Judge dragged in his horse.

"Hoofs," he murmured. "Three riders cuttin' in from the west. That means then they came from town. Now who in their right sense would be ridin'—?"

"Look yonder," said Tobacco Jones excitedly.

Judge Bates followed his partner's jabbing finger. Surprise crept across him but he held it behind a bland exterior. Across a nearby ocotillo bush hung a string of white cloth. He giggled his horse closer and recognized it as a piece of white gauze bandage. He took it from the bush. The gauze was clean and new; the desert sun had not tarnished it.

"Dropped there recently, too," he pondered. He lifted deep eyes to his tobacco-chewing comrade. "Mind the doctor said he was goin' to get some bandages? Gauze bandages, he said?"

Tobacco Jones nodded. "But where does that fit in with this?"

"The ways of man and Fate," sighed the heavy-set jurist, "are fickle and no man

knows thoroughly of the present, to say nothing of the future. Let's follow this trail and see what we see."

"No use lookin' for that cattle trail again," mumbled Tobacco Jones. "The wind just blowed that plumb away."

"Look on yonder chamiso shrub," said the Judge.

Tobacco Jones' pale eyes contracted. "Another bit of gauze, huh?"

They followed the trail. Led by bits of gauze, scattered sometimes a long distance apart, they rode ahead. Plainly somebody had deliberately left the gauze as a means of following his path. That fact became apparent to Judge Lemanuel Bates, and drew a frown across his wide, tanned forehead.

"Somebody," he said, "has kidnapped the doctor."

Tobacco looked at him sharply as he bit off a chew. "That jug," he said dourly, "is gettin' the best of you, Bates. Now your mind's goin'."

"Lip up that chatter," said Judge Bates heatedly. "The set-up is this, fellow. When the T Down riders crossed gunfire with the bandits, mayhap some of them blocked lead."

"An' you figger—?"

The Judge nodded. "Just that, Tobacco. Some of them bandits got plugged. They need medical care. The closest doc is Doc Stevens. They ride in, get him. Now they're takin' him to their hideout in Mexico. An' he's leavin' a trail behind him, figgerin' sure as hell somebody'll try to trail him an' find him."

Tobacco leaned back in saddle. "Let's ride, Judge!"

TWO HOURS later they were in the hills. The desert was behind them. The torrid sun boiled in the morning sky. Already heat-waves shimmered and danced across the sand. Sand devils lifted in the lazy wind, whirled, danced, died.

Across the twisted, lonesome expanse, they had followed the trail marked by gauze. The river lay beyond the next rise, and caution rode strongly on Judge Lemanuel Bates' broad shoulders.

They drew up in a brushy gully. Ground-tying their sweaty horses, they climbed the rise, hunkered there under a jut of sandstone. Below them lay the river, flow-

ing swiftly south along the Border, its banks marked by high rushes and cat-tails. Solemnly the Judge studied the terrain below through glasses. Tobacco dozed, openly sleepy. The Judge's elbow, prodding his ribs, brought him awake. Judge Bates handed his lanky partner the field-glasses.

"Yonder," he murmured. "In the shade of them willows."

Tobacco focused the lenses. "An hombre squattin' there. A rifle across his knees. No horse with him, though. A Mex. Wonder where his cayuse is?"

"Ain't got none," grunted the Judge. "He don't need none. Look in them rushes between him an' the river."

Tobacco did. "A boat, huh— That means he comes up the river an' stands guard. Then that must be where the bandits go down the river?"

Judge Bates nodded. "They swim the herd down through that cut. River's awful fast there, but they can get the cattle through. Let's me an' you work that guard over, eh?"

Quickly they built their strategy of attack. They would circle out, swing wide, come in on either side of the guard. Judge Bates watched his partner move downslope and become lost in the rushes. Then he went ahead.

Cat-tails rubbed against him. When he came to a wide trail trampled through the rushes, he realized that the T Down cattle had been driven this way—pushed into the river, made to swim downstream into Mexico. Twenty minutes later, squatted under a clump of willows, he watched the guard.

A squat, black son of Sonora, he thought. Negro, Indian, and Spanish. He wore bell-bottomed, dirty pants, boots, big roweled spurs. With a greasy red shirt, a bandolier, a .45 on one hip, a knife on the other. And a rifle beside him.

Though he listened, Judge Bates could not hear Tobacco. He waited, muscles stiff. Minutes ticked by. The guard shifted, grunted, settled back. Beyond him the Judge caught the movement of the rushes, and he knew Tobacco Jones was coming in.

Gun up, Judge Bates stepped forward. He said, "*Levantase, hombre,*" and then, "Get up, an' keep your hands away from your guns. *Sabe?*"

The guard had crawled to his feet. Dark face surprised, he stared wildly at the Judge. Judge Bates cocked his .45. The man's dark, heavy hands rose shoulder-high. Judge Bates saw his surprise die, saw a hard smile rim the heavy lips. Tobacco stepped out, his Colt steady.

"Well, we got this gent, Judge. We—"

A harsh voice behind them said, "Okay, gents, put up them paws! Bates, drop that gun! Same goes for you, Jones! Turn around now, slow-like!"

Judge Bates glanced at Tobacco. The thin man's lips hung loosely in surprise. Tobacco could see the speaker. Tobacco Jones let his gun fall to the ground. His voice was low.

"Better drop your gun, Judge, we ain't got a chance. Tal LeBaron's behin' you with two .45's."

Judge Bates' gun dropped.

LeBaron's thick lips wore a truculent sneer. "Walked right into our trap, Bates," he gloated. "Maybe they make them smarter here along the Border than they do in Wyomin'?"

The judge nodded. He saw through it now. But LeBaron's next words clarified any conflicts in his mind.

"When we came to the river, we saw too late that the doc had been droppin' them gauze pieces. So we sent our horses downstream an' waited here to see if anybody was follerin' the mdico." He spoke to the Mexican. "Pedro, get their broncs."

The Mexican left, came back a few minutes later, leading their two horses. Judge Bates looked longingly at his sawed-off shotgun tied to the fork. And at his whiskey jug beside the scattergun.

"How about a drink?" he asked.

LeBaron said, "After me," and tilted the jug. He drank long and noisily, and anger flooded Judge Lemanuel Bates. When he handed the jug to the juror, Judge Bates said cuttingly, "Any left?"

LeBaron glared. "Bates, I'll have to jerk you apart yet—"

The guard said, "No time for that now, Senor LeBaron. Get these two hombres down the reever. Eef somebody else should come—"

LEBARON stopped. "Guess you're right, Pedro. Get on one of these broncs an' ride back ten miles or so an' pick up that

gauze. I'll take the other into camp. Bates an' Jones, climb into that boat. Pronto! Leave your guns on the ground."

"My jug?" asked the Judge.

"I'll handle that." Gun still on them, LeBaron stopped, picked up the jug. Then, with the Judge and Tobacco walking ahead, they went to the hidden boat. Pedro led Tobacco's horse into the water, tied up its reins, hit him over the rump with his quirt. The bronc leaped ahead, started swimming. The swift current took him downstream into the gulley. Soon he was just a black, bobbing cork drifting on the foam-tossed waters ahead.

"Where's Doc now?" asked Judge Bates.

"You'll soon find out," said Tal LeBaron. "Bates, you know how to row a boat?"

Judge Bates lied. "No."

"Time you learned, then," grunted LeBaron. "Grab them oars an' no funny business, *sabe*? All you got to do is point it into the stream."

The Judge plied the oars. LeBaron sat in the stern, gun on them. Tobacco Jones slouched on the floor, face taciturn. Back on the shore, the guard took the Judge's horse, rode back across the desert, picking up the bits of betraying gauze. Now the high rushes cut him from view.

The boat sagged, lurched. The canyon seemed to reach out and swallow them. Here, in the rushing, foaming rapids, Judge Bates piled his strength and skill, against the roaring water. Here he could, by putting pressure on one oar, send the boat into the rocks, wrecking it. But he knew Tobacco Jones couldn't swim a stroke.

The boat slipped down the stream, leaped a rapid, settled on slower water. Ten minutes later they saw the bandits' camp ahead.

Through thoughtful eyes Judge Bates appraised the camp. Gigantic cliffs surrounded a flat bottom, comprising about a quarter-section. Under the crags stood five cabins. There were corrals and cattle were grazing on the flat.

"Quite a set-up," murmured Judge Bates. "Over yonder trail that leads up the cliff, you drive stolen cattle? Push them south to the slaughtering pens and butcher your stolen T Down beef in the security of the Mexican desert?"

"You think okay," grunted LeBaron.

They beached the boat, strode through

lines of grinning Mexican vaqueros. They were a tough, outcast lot. Loaded bandoliers hung over their shoulders, they were armed heavily. Surly, ugly, they watched them through heavy, dark eyes. LeBaron behind, they went to a cabin set apart. A guard stood at the door.

"H'okay," he said in broken English. "*Vaya.*"

They entered. A cot stood against the wall. A man lay there—dark, slender, thin-lipped. Pain showed in his eyes. He was undressed except for his wide-bottomed pants and boots.

Beside him was Doc Stevens. The medico's eyes showed surprise. "Bates and Jones," he murmured. "And how did you get tangled up with this iniquity?"

The Judge smiled, "Gauze—"

"The only way to leave a trail behind me," muttered the M. D. "Sorry that it ran out wrong—"

"Our mistake," assured the Judge.

The man on the cot spoke, "I'm Juan Martinez," he said in clear English. "I got plugged last night when we raided the T Down herd. You gentlemen have, unwittingly, blundered upon our hideout. The doctor pulled a smart trick on that simple-minded lug over there—" Martinez jabbed a thumb toward LeBaron.

LeBaron said, "If you wasn't wounded, Juan, I'd make you—"

Juan Martinez brought his hand from under the blanket. He held a Colt .45. He said, "Why not pull your trigger, LeBaron? Haven't you got any brains at all?"

LeBaron stared. "What you drivin' at, Martinez?"

Martinez laughed huskily. "Your day is done, LeBaron. I've used you long enough. You know too much about me an' my raiders."

LeBaron said, thinly, "So that's your game, huh, spic? Playin' me against Johnny Douglas an' promisin' me I'd come out with the T Down spread. Now that you got the T Down cattle, you aim to get my Circle Y stock. Kill me an' rustle my herds! Is that it, Mex?"

Martinez nodded.

THE DOCTOR had moved back against the wall. Tobacco, too, had slowly moved out of fire-line. Judge Bates stood aside, taking in the scene. Through the

juror's mind tumbled a thousand thoughts.

Martinez's gun spat flame before LeBaron could fire. Three times the gun roared; three bullets hit LeBaron. The cattleman swayed, dropped his unfired gun. Hardly had the weapon struck the floor than LeBaron came down beside it. He lay on his belly, right arm sprawled out, head twisted.

The guard rushed in, gun drawn. Outside, boots pounded toward the cabin. Martinez settled back, his face showing pain.

He said, "Drag the carcass out, Gomez. The big American ox got what he should have received some time ago— Is he dead, medico?"

The doctor knelt beside LeBaron. "No," he finally said, "he's still alive. Not for long."

Martinez cocked his gun. "I guess I should finish him off." His face was dark, savage, and Judge Bates sensed the twisted, distorted mind underneath.

The Judge said softly, "Don't let that hammer fall, Martinez. He's danged near dead as it is."

Martinez switched his gun to Judge Bates. "You want to take up his quarrel, no?" Dark eyes, savage, bitter, bored into the Judge's.

"I'm unarmed," said Judge Bates.

Silence momentarily. Judge Bates still held his whiskey jug. He'd sling that at Martinez, if the man went to fire, and try to dive for LeBaron's gun, five feet away. But his chances would be slim.

He glanced at Tobacco Jones. His partner's jaw was frozen, but Tobacco's eyes were alert. A half-minute ticked by. Finally Juan Martinez spoke.

"Will he live, Doc?"

"Not long," said the medico again.

Martinez kept his gun on the Judge. "I should kill you two. But I'll give you one choice. I understand that up in Wyoming you're a judge, Bates? Is that correct?"

"It is."

"We need men like you on our side. Men with brains and legal wisdom. Villa'll make it worth your time if you join our forces. You'll get your share of plunder and when it's all over you'll own a big Mexican rancho. If you agree to come to our cause I'll let you and your partner live."

Judge Bates stalled. "You know quite a bit about me, huh?"

"LeBaron told me you were visiting on

the T Down. Well, what's your answer?"

"And Doc Stevens, here?" asked the Judge. "What about him?"

Juan Martinez said, "I offer Señor Stevens the same terms. If he works with us, he saves his life. We need doctors. Soon, when we have the supplies distributed, our armies march. You call them ragged soldiers, *peons*, but there is fire inside of them." The man's eyes were glowing coals.

He was, the Judge saw, a fanatic. He looked at Doc Stevens; the medico nodded slightly. Tobacco Jones resumed his chewing.

"Nothin' else to do, Judge," he said.

Judge Bates shrugged wide shoulders. "Give us a little time to think it over? Say until this evenin'?"

"All right," said Juan Martinez. He called to the guard. "Take these men to cabin *cinco*."

"My jug," said the Judge. "I want it."

Juan Martinez smiled with his lips only and said, "Si, señor, the jug goes with you. Medico, you stay here. Carry the Americano into *cinco*, too."

CHAPTER THREE

Payoff In Gunsmoke

AS THE afternoon sun rose, the temperature climbed. Inside the cabin, the air was stifling. LeBaron groaned, sat up, babbled unconsciously. Judge Bates poured whiskey into him. Only the fiery liquid kept life in the wounded cowman. The Judge shook his jug. Little more than one-half full, he judged expertly.

"I'll kill him," muttered LeBaron.

Judge Bates opened the door. "You want a drink?" he asked the guard.

The swarthy eyes lighted. "Si." Dark hands raised the jug. But before the lips could close on the spout, came the voice of Juan Martinez. The renegade leader strode across the enclosure.

"Lower that jug, man! Hear me!"

The guard shoved the jug to Judge Bates. He saluted clumsily, said, "Si, señor." But Martinez' quirt rose, slashed. The heavy butt, shot-loaded, hit the guard across the forehead, split the skin, knocked him against the cabin.

(Please turn to page 90)

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(Continued from page 88)

"Get outa here," ordered Martinez.

The man stared at him dully. Hate and fear showed in his beady eyes. He turned, wordlessly, and stumbled away. Martinez beckoned to a watching soldier.

"Stephano, stand this post. And remember, no whiskey." Martinez turned to Judge Bates, smiling silkily. "You have made up your mind, no?"

"We ride with your men, Martinez."

The smile grew. "Si, 'sta bueno." The smile died. "The discipline is strict, señores. You have seen that, no?"

Judge Bates held his hot temper. "We have seen," he murmured, "and understand. Now we are free to move about camp?"

Martinez laughed softly. "In a few days," he promised. He stepped inside, went to LeBaron, booted him. LeBaron stared up, dazedly. Martinez looked at him, eyes bleak; he turned and left.

"Get inside," the new guard ordered.

The afternoon droned by. Still LeBaron clung to life, babbling sometimes; other times with his mind clear. How he did it, Judge Bates did not know. Seated on the floor, he pondered their situation.

Through the turmoil of his thoughts, one thought stood clear. With Doc Stevens kidnapped, the New Mexico country would be up in alarm. Would Sheriff Jorgenson hit the trail of gauze? And, if he did find it, would he understand?

Already he had offered the new guard a drink of whiskey, but the man had turned down the offer.

"You can't get a man drunk," murmured Tobacco, "who won't take a drink."

Darkness finally came.

"Well," said Judge Bates, "no Jorgenson—" His eyes were bright. "But if we do make good our escape, we can't go up the river. Only thing I see is that we climb the ridge and hike north across the Border on foot."

"But first," said Tobacco Jones, "I'd like to salt down a few of these hombres, like this Martinez gent. Him gettin' so wide across the pants he crosses the Border to raid T Down cattle. You know, Judge, maybeso he fired the bullets that wounded Johnny."

THE WHISKEY-JUG REBELLION

"Time," said the Judge solemnly, "will tell." He tilted, drank. "What I wouldn't give for my shotgun—" He sidled his bulk against the wall beside the door. Now the night was so dark Tobacco could not see him. "Call in the guard, Tobacco."

Then Judge Bates was kicking against the wall, scuffling his feet. Grunts broke from his lips. He cursed huskily. To anybody outside it would seem as though men were battling in the cabin. The juror grabbed a chair, smashed it against the wall.

Tobacco Jones cried, "Hey, guard, he's killin' me! He's chokin'—" Tobacco trailed his words off into a gurgle.

ABOVE HIS own noise, Judge Bates kept ears tuned to the guard's movements. Would the man send for help or would he enter alone?

"Que es, hombres? What goes on there?"

"Quick, guard," gasped Tobacco.

A moment of indecision. The door opened then and the guard stood there, pistol up. Judge Bates' brawny arm made a quick sweep. The guard was pulled forward, his gun coughing into the floor. Tobacco Jones came in now, and the guard went down. Judge Bates' jug came down. The guard went limp.

"You got him," said LeBaron weakly.

Tobacco grabbed the gun. Judge Bates ran blunt fingers around the bottom of his jug. "Never broke," he said, thickly. "I've tol' you many a time, Tobacco, that this jug would come in handy."

Tobacco shoved the gun into his partner's hand. "Here, Judge, you're a better shot than me." The lanky man had a bandolier of bullets. "Now make tracks; they've heard us, an' they're comin'!"

"He got another gun on him?"

"Searched him, but couldn't find one."

Judge Bates said, "Hang an' rattle, LeBaron," and then they were outside. Through the darkness came lanterns and jarring bolts. Temptation lured the juror to plant a bullet into some of the oncoming forms. But logic told him that he and Tobacco Jones had best exit as hurriedly and as unnoticed as possible.

They moved along a cabin. Over them, rimming the black sky, towered the en-



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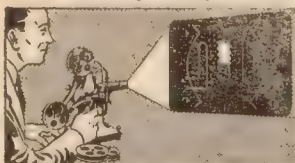
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circling cliffs. Judge Bates remembered the trail that wound down, and marked his way toward that. Behind him came rapid Spanish.

"They are gone, hombres! The guard, he ees here an' he has no sense!"

A voice cut above the confusion. "Scatter out at the base of the cliffs! Watch the river!" Juan Martinez' voice.

"A gun," grunted Tobacco. "I gotta get a gun."

Judge Bates glanced in a cabin window. The lamp was wicked low inside; the place empty. And against the far wall hung a rifle and holstered pistol. With Tobacco following, he slid toward the door.

He paused momentarily, listening to the din. Behind him on the flat, cattle were stirring, aroused by the cries. He pushed open the door, entered. Hard upon the door's closing, came the call of a man.

"Miguel, where are you?"

"Here, Valenzuela, you fool!"

"Somebody go into our cabin!"

A bullet slammed into the casing.

Juan Martinez shouted, "Are you sure, Valenzuela?"

"Si. The fat man he ees carry hees jog!"

Tobacco glared. "Now we're trapped! An' if it hadn't a-been for that damn' jug, they might not've recognized us."

"Get the rifle, Tobacco."

Squatting beside the window, Judge Bates fired over the sill. He raked the brush, sending dark forms into hiding. He blew the smoke from his gun and reloaded. Tobacco was by the back window.

"Got many shells, Tobacco?"

"Not too many, Judge. By gad, we're behin' the eight ball, an' there ain't no cues or pockets!"

"Harken to that," said Judge Bates.

Tobacco listened. "Gunfire," he murmured, "comin' from the base of the hill. Them guns ain't firin' at us, are they?"

They weren't.

THE renegades were trapped between two fires. Some were crying surrender, others were dying under fire. The murderous attack coming from the hills, took the gunfire away from their cabin.

The Judge blew out the lamp, then slipped

THE WHISKEY-JUG REBELLION

outside into the dark. A rider swept by on a black horse. Lamplight framed him. The Judge roared, "Martinez! Stop, hombre!"

Martinez twisted in saddle. A bullet beat the sod beside Judge Bates. Coldly, he raised his short-gun, but he never dropped hammer. Now, out of the shadows, a gun spoke and knocked Martinez from leather.

Martinez hit the sod, stumbled, pulled himself up. Standing there, his weapon roared. Now the man came out of the shadows; he walked stooped-over, slowly. His gun was bucking. Martinez, caught in its deadly web, went sprawling, fell on his face. The man's knees buckled.

He said slowly, "Well, I killed him, Bates."

Judge Bates knelt beside him. "You evened it up, LeBaron." The man was dying. The Judge and Tobacco stretched him out on the ground. He was dead, then.

"He went out like a man, Tobacco. Guess he musta got a gun somewhere—mayhap he killed a man to get it. The fires of hate burn strongly. Who's this comin'?"

"Sheriff Jorgenson, I think."

"Howdy, Bates. Howdy, Jones. Everythin' turned out okay, huh? Doc Stevens is all right, too."

"How'd you get here?" asked the Judge.

"Found that trail Doc left. Also got hold of that Mex guard up the river. He talked, plenty. But we couldn't come down the river, too risky. So we went overland. Who killed LaBaron an' Martinez?"

"Killed one other," said the Judge.

The lawman nodded, somberly. "The wages of sin are gunsmoke," he murmured. "My men'll take these T Down cows north. But we can't jail these *bandidos*, much as they need it. Me, I'm off my legal stampin' grounds, as it is. But we'll burn this outfit plumb to the ground when we leave."

The Judge asked, "How's Johnny?"

"Gettin' along fine. Say, you got anythin' in that jug?"

Bates handed him the jug. "Coupla snorts. That jug sure came in handy to-night, Jorgenson." The Judge smiled at Tobacco. "Ain't that so, Tobacco?"

Tobacco chewed vigorously. "I hate to admit it," he said, "but I guess it sure did!"

THE END

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SAYMAN SALVE

(Continued from page 79)

peared in the light again his gun was in his hand. He ducked through the door, and the two yellow squares that marked the cabin windows blacked out.

HENRY picked up a rock and tossed it onto the roof of the cabin. Then he waited. After awhile he tossed another rock. It rattled across the warped shakes and dropped to the ground. They'd come out—sooner or later. Those rocks hitting the roof would be like listening to the even drip of water in a pan.

The rattle of loose gravel gave him his first indication that he had miscalculated. He rolled and turned, just in time to be dazed by the explosion of a gun close to his face. Then he was pumping shells through the Winchester, shooting wildly at the black shape above him until the man crumpled and his riddled body fell among the rocks at Henry's feet. Henry felt blood dripping from his fingers and somehow he knew vaguely that it was his own blood. He raised his arm and saw the jagged tear in his flesh.

"Kelso!" Cutler called from the cabin. "You all right?"

"No, he's not all right, Cutler," Henry called back shakily. "He's dead. Just like Howard Cooper and Raymond and Vince Crandall are dead. You killed them, Cutler—all of them. Maybe I could have stopped it, Cutler, if I hadn't been afraid. I'm not afraid now. I'm paying off my debt! You'll pay yours in hell!"

Cutler said, "Let me talk to you."

"I'll talk to you with a gun," Henry said. "I'm coming after you."

"You haven't got the guts," Cutler called.

"I had guts enough to get one for Vince Crandall and one for Clint Raymond," Henry said. "I've got guts enough to get you for Howard Cooper."

"You're crazy, Henry," Cutler called. "I didn't kill those men. I wasn't even there."

"You planned it," Henry said. "I'm coming." He stood up and walked down the steep rock slope toward the cabin. Cutler started shooting wildly. Lead whined from the rock. "You missed me, Cutler," Henry called. "I'm still coming."

"Wait a minute, Henry," Cutler yelled shakily.

Return of the Boothill Gunman

His voice was high with fear. Henry levered a shell into the Winchester. He had never felt so calm in his life. He hoped that his wife was not worrying about him. He was close to the cabin now, and Cutler was firing. Six wild shots, and then a pause, as if Cutler were reloading—or picking up another loaded gun. Then there was a thunderous explosion. The sound of the report seemed to fill the valley with its echo. Henry put down his gun.

"That's for you, Howard," he said and suddenly he felt alone and afraid. The darkness pressed close around him and he wanted to run away from the three still forms that he knew were lying so close. He forced himself to enter the cabin and light the lamp. The bank's money was there in two canvas bags. His father's gun lay beside the outlaw's dead hand, its barrel warped and bent from the explosion.

MEN stared when Henry Hampton rode down the main street of Alturas. The little hardware dealer was haggard and bloodstained. There were two canvas sacks tied behind the saddle of Hank Cutler's horse and a new gun in a new holster was hanging from the saddle horn.

Henry rode to the sheriff's office where saddle-weary men made reports of a fruitless night-ride. The little man told his story simply and plainly and men stood by, slack-jawed. His wife was there, wide-eyed and proud, as she tenderly bandaged the wound in his arm. When he had finished he said, "I'm tired. I better have some sleep."

He started to leave, then he hesitated. Reaching over, he picked up the ruined gun in its new belt and strapped it around his thin waist. "It was a good gun," he said. "My—a relative of mine—gave it to me when he knew he wasn't going to use it any more. He plugged up the barrel then, because he didn't want me to use it, and he didn't want any other man to maybe fire it in a cause that wasn't right. But I guess he wouldn't mind having it fired, this one last time—the wrong kind of man pulled the trigger, but the gun shot the right way."

With his head high and his wife clinging to his arm, Henry Hampton stepped out into the sun-flooded street of Alturas. Men moved aside to let him by.

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(Continued from page 73)

asked the captain why it was necessary to bother with such notorious prisoners.

The captain replied that it wasn't. So the sergeants detailed a squad of men and took the bandits off the road to a deserted cabin. Here they were lined up, and the squad given orders to fire. The soldiers, knowing what it was to be, refused to shoot the helpless prisoners. So the sergeants shot them down with pistols.

They were left for vultures and coyotes. But one man was not killed. Though severely wounded, he finally reached Denver. After he recovered he went in search of John Reynolds and Stowe, whom he found in Santa Fe. Shortly thereafter they started out on the journey to the Spanish Peaks, to unearth the treasure, but while stealing horses on the way, all were killed but Reynolds. He escaped, and dug up the ten thousand dollars. This, however, did not last him long. So, with a friend by the name of Brown he again headed north to recover the forty thousand dollars.

Along the way they robbed and pillaged till they finally ran into an ambush. Reynolds was mortally wounded. Brown finally got him to an abandoned house where, before he died, he gave directions to the forty thousand dollar cache.

"We went up Geneva Creek and crossed to the head of Deer Creek," Reynolds managed to say. "There we found an old prospect hole. We put the greenbacks wrapped in old oil cloth and several cans of gold dust into it and covered them up with rocks. . . ."

Before he died Reynolds laboriously drew a crude map, said still to be in existence. Brown buried him, then went to Denver and afterwards made several unsuccessful attempts to find the money. Later, during a drunken brawl in Fort Laramie, he was killed.

Many men since that time have searched for this treasure, but without success. Some have returned with stories of ghostly riders of the dusk who are guarding the cache. Others claim that these restless horsemen are doomed to ride the Spanish Peaks till the end of time, as penalty for murders committed to satisfy their lust for conquest.

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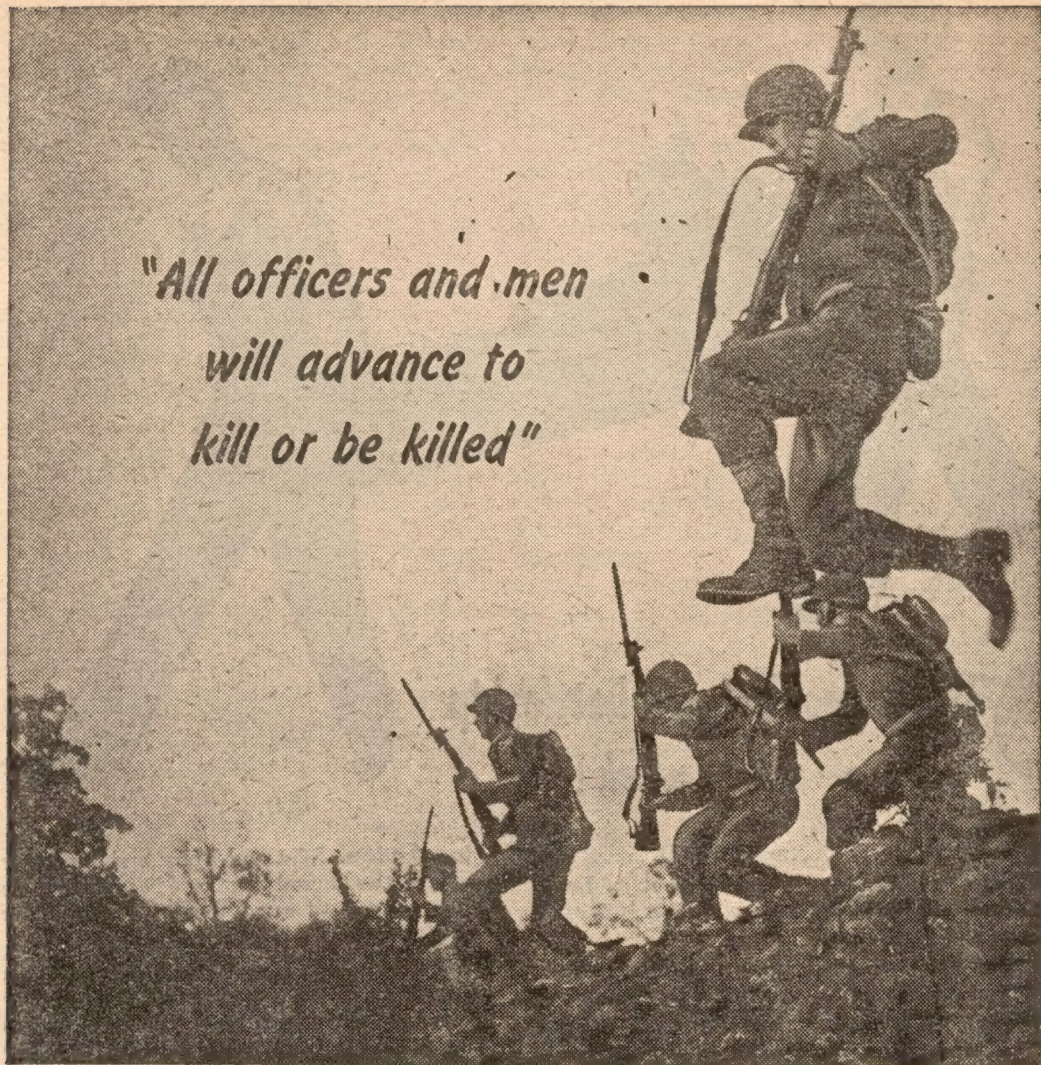
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KESSLER'S PRIVATE BLEND. 75% Grain Neutral Spirits. 85 Proof. Julius Kessler Distilling Co., Inc., Lawrenceburg, Ind